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TEACHING ABOUT IDENTITY: LESSONS FROM 1930s GERMANY



Teaching About Identity: Lessons From 1930s Germany

A Project of FAIR in Education

Introduction

In the field of K-12 education, there is an ongoing conversation about how to frame and teach about human identity. As researchers and teachers who have worked with diverse groups of students in public and private schools, correctional facilities, centers for youth experiencing homelessness, and universities, we know firsthand the importance of approaching identity-related topics with care and awareness of students' vulnerabilities, especially connected to mental health. We wondered if a historical understanding of other countries' experiences with teaching about identity might help us recognize patterns and avoid mistakes. We began investigating twentieth century contexts in which teachers made grave mistakes in teaching about identity—mistakes that at the time seemed scientific, unifying, correct, and culturally necessary—but ultimately laid a tragic foundation for inter-group hatred.

We chose three contexts: 1930s Germany, 1960s China, and 1980s-1990s Rwanda. We read history texts, memoirs, lesson plans, textbooks, and other primary source materials, searching for artifacts to illustrate the dominant approach to identity education in each historical context. Drawing on these materials, we have curated a series of quotations and images meant to convey the flavor and feeling of identity education in each context. We hope that this collection of artifacts from 1930s Germany causes readers to deeply reflect about the ways we address matters of race, ethnicity, and human identity in schools and elsewhere.

These artifacts are a tiny fraction of the relevant material available, meant only as an introduction. In looking outside our national and temporal context, we've discovered important insights to apply to our teaching practices. Our hope is that you, too, will find insights to support your work and students, and that you will be inspired to continue learning from the past in an effort to constructively address the present and future.

1930s Germany

Historical Context

Nowadays, the word “German” is used to refer to a national identity: someone born and raised in Germany. “German-speaker” can refer to peoples of the countries in which German is an official language or one spoken by a large minority: Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (official languages), or Poland (former Prussia in the north) and the Czech Republic. For many years prior to 1945, however, “German” or “Deutscher/Volksdeutscher” had an ethnic connotation within German-speaking lands (Germany, Prussia, Austria). “German” was an ethnicity, not a purely linguistic or political entity.

Over the centuries, this “ethnicity” had spread throughout central and eastern Europe—far beyond the present-day political boundaries of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. During the first and second world wars (especially true during World War II), German leaders—most notably Chancellor Adolf Hitler—sought to “reunify” the (ethnic) German peoples under one banner: the (after 1933) Third Reich. For someone like Hitler and, indeed, many Germans, (ethnic) Germans needed a unified “space to live” (*Lebensraum*), free of the “harmful” influence of groups that would—in Hitler’s perception—work to undermine German identity and culture, and indeed work to rot the German state from within. German identity was under existential threat, and this threat had to be countered by the state and popular efforts to ensure that “das deutsche Volk” (the German people) could secure their “rightful” place as a secure cultural, ethnic, and national identity.

While some of the internal threats were political and ideological—Communists, Bolsheviks, Seventh-Day Adventists—Jews were framed as the most pressing existential challenge to German identity and security. While antisemitism pre-dated Weimar Germany by centuries, Hitler and many Germans saw Germany’s defeat in World War I—and subsequent humiliation and economic devastation following the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles, which crippled the German economy—as being primarily the fault of Jewish and Communist “conspirators” within Germany’s army during the first World War. For Hitler, Jews were the source of German suffering; and Jews were continuing to target Germany from within. Furthermore, Jews came to be seen as an existential threat to ethnic Germans. One can see this in a book that was translated into German in the late 1920s: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a popular book that revealed a supposed Jewish “plot” to take over the world. The problem was, the document was a forgery—a fake. It had been written in Russia at the beginning of the century by an anonymous author (or authors). As open antisemitism was on the rise in Germany after World War I, the book provided fuel for antisemitic views. It “confirmed” in the minds of many that Jews were out to get them. It was pure propaganda.

With this zeitgeist growing in its antisemitic vitriol, Jews soon came to be targeted for elimination from German society, for the “protection” of the Reich. What began as negative stereotypes and widespread antisemitic attitudes soon became widespread antisemitic tropes and

messaging in the media, followed shortly thereafter by legislation, beginning in 1933, that effectively banned Jews from participation in large swaths of German society: universities, professorships, civil service, law, the military, and the arts.¹ With the passing of the Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935, Jews were banned from citizenship in the Reich.² Jewish students were expelled from German schools in 1938. As can be expected, this polarization between Jews and “Volksdeutsche” (ethnic Germans) made its way into the classroom in the form of bullying, official state curriculum, and teachers’ practices. Who was a Jew? Who was a German? The answer to this question in schools could mean the difference between inclusion and acceptance by the “ethnic” majority and school community, or exclusion, targeting, shaming, bullying, and, ultimately in 1938, expulsion. What began as subtle antisemitism morphed into open antisemitism—in teachers’ non-Jewish students’ behavior and attitudes, official state curricula, and expulsion from schools.

As we now know only all too well, these steps were but part of the long march to one of the most horrifying chapters in human history: the Holocaust, which saw over six million Jews systematically imprisoned, murdered, and slaughtered en masse as part of Hitler’s “final solution to the Jewish question” (*Endlösung der Judenfrage*).

What is National Socialist Racial Ideology?

Summary from *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:

Adolf Hitler, the Führer (Leader) of the Nazi Party, formulated and articulated the ideas that came to be known as Nazi ideology. He thought of himself as a deep and profound thinker, convinced that he had found the key to understanding an extraordinarily complex world. Hitler believed that a person's characteristics, attitudes, abilities, and behavior were determined by his or her so-called racial make-up. In Hitler's view, all groups, races, or peoples (he used those terms interchangeably) carried within them traits that were passed from one generation to the next. No individual could overcome the qualities of race. All of human history could be explained in terms of racial struggle.

In formulating their ideology of race, Hitler and the Nazis drew upon the ideas of the German social Darwinists of the late 19th century. Like the social Darwinists before them, the Nazis believed that human beings could be classified collectively as “races,” with each race bearing distinctive characteristics that had been passed on genetically since the first appearance of humans in prehistoric times. These inherited characteristics related not only to outward appearance and physical structure, but also shaped internal mental life, ways of thinking, creative and organizational abilities, intelligence, taste and appreciation of culture, physical strength, and military prowess. The Nazis also adopted the social Darwinist take on Darwinian evolutionary

¹ United States Holocaust Museum, “Anti-Jewish Legislation in Prewar Germany,” <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/anti-jewish-legislation-in-prewar-germany>, Accessed on Dec. 31, 2023.

² *ibid.*

theory regarding the “survival of the fittest.” For the Nazis, survival of a race depended upon its ability to reproduce and multiply, its accumulation of land to support and feed that expanding population, and its vigilance in maintaining the purity of its gene pool, thus preserving the unique “racial” characteristics with which “nature” had equipped it for success in the struggle to survive. Since each “race” sought to expand, and since the space on the earth was finite, the struggle for survival resulted “naturally” in violent conquest and military confrontation. Hence, war—even constant war—was a part of nature, a part of the human condition.

To define a race, the social Darwinists affixed stereotypes, both positive and negative, of ethnic group appearance, behavior, and culture. These stereotypes were allegedly unchangeable and rooted in biological inheritance. They remained unchanged over time and were immune to changes in environment, intellectual development, or socialization. For the Nazis, assimilation of a member of one race into another culture or ethnic group was impossible because the original inherited traits could not change: they could only degenerate through so-called race-mixing. The Nazis defined Jews as a “race.” Regarding the Jewish religion as irrelevant, the Nazis attributed a wide variety of negative stereotypes about Jews and “Jewish” behavior to an unchanging biologically determined heritage that drove the “Jewish race,” like other races, to struggle to survive by expansion at the expense of other races... For Hitler and other leaders of the Nazi movement, the ultimate value of a human being lay not in his or her individuality, but in his or her membership in a racially defined collective group. The ultimate purpose of a racial collective was to ensure its own survival.

(United States Holocaust Museum, “Victims of the Nazi Era: Nazi Racial Ideology,” <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/victims-of-the-nazi-era-nazi-racial-ideology>, accessed on Dec. 31, 2023)

Artifacts from 1930s Germany

1. Hitler's Goals for Education

Adolf Hitler expressed his goals for education and whom should be targeted by Germany's education efforts:

In my [Hitler's] great educative work, I am beginning with the young. We older ones are used up. Yes, we are old already. We are rotten to the marrow. We have no unrestrained instincts left. We are bearing the burden of a humiliating past, and have in our blood the dull recollection of serfdom and servility. But my magnificent youngsters! Are there finer ones anywhere in the world? Look at these young men and boys! What material! With them I can make a new world.

(Cited in Hermann Rauschning, *Hitler Speaks: A Series of Political Conversations with Adolf Hitler on his Real Aims*, Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2010, p. 246)

2. Teacher Training in Nazi Germany

The *Nationalsozialistischer Lehrerbund* (National Socialist Teachers' League), or NSLB, was established on April 21, 1929. The NSLB offered courses and training camps meant to change teachers "totally and in every aspect of their lives," to identify "enemies of National Socialism," and to outline the struggle between National Socialist, Nordic, and Judaeo-Christian values. Topics of study included racial knowledge, genetics and hereditary health, German prehistory, racial ancestry, and ancestral biology. There were also courses on "racial lore" such as "Race and Space," "Race and Language," "Race and Fairy Tales," "Race and Art," and "Race and Musical Education" (BA NS 12/1400, *Bericht über Kreiswalteragung*, cited in Pine, Lisa, *Education in Nazi Germany*, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010, p. 19). A participant in a ten-day NSLB camp describes his experience:

A communal life began for all of us, in this community... [The purpose was] to turn educators of different occupational classes and different age groups into one combat community—a community in which all dividing walls are torn down by collective existence and experience... [The lecture on Jews and Freemasons] in particular opened the eyes of all participants in a deep and thorough way to how the German people before, during and after the war... was lied to and betrayed [until Hitler] freed the German people from a scourge of mankind.

(Cited in Lisa Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010, p.17)

3. Nazi Teacher Training Manuals

Official documents were created to instruct teachers on how to teach about “race” in education. In this instance, Fritz Fink, a German school superintendent, wrote *The Jewish Question in Education*, published in 1937. The pamphlet explores a new area in German schooling, in which students were explicitly taught about social issues. In particular, this manual provides instruction to teachers on how to teach about ethnicity in German classrooms, as we read in the text’s introduction:

The National Socialist state has brought about fundamental changes in every area of the life of the German people. It has also given the German teacher new tasks. The National Socialist state demands that teachers teach German children about the racial question. For the German people, the racial question is the Jewish question. He who wishes to teach the children about the Jews must himself become an expert [...] because fate has called him to a battle that let him gain knowledge about Jewish blood and its effects on the German people.

(Introduction to *The Jewish Question in Education*, by Julius Streicher, 1937, cited in Randall Bytwerk, ed., *The Jewish Question in Education*. research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fink.htm, accessed Dec. 31, 2023)

4. Antisemitism in Nazi Teacher Training Manuals

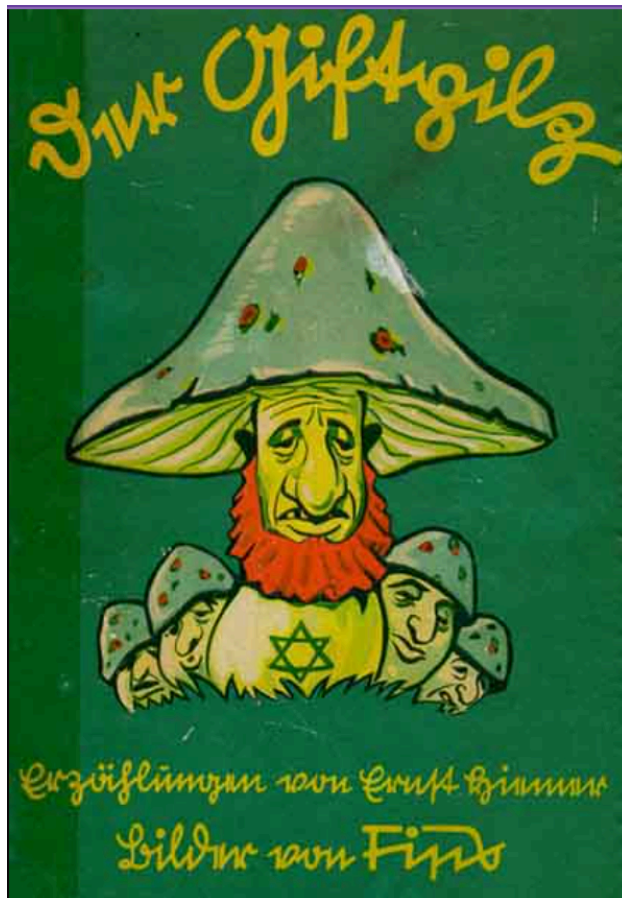
The following excerpt is also from Fink’s introduction. In it, he explains the necessity of racial education for the “safety” of the German people—this education is a necessity for Germans. Many teachers throughout Germany read this as part of their training. As we can see, this teacher training manual explicitly takes an activist stance on addressing the “dangers” posed by Jews:

The enormous significance of the Jewish Question is recognized today by nearly every member of the German people. This knowledge cost our people a long period of misery. To spare the coming generations this misery, we want German teachers to plant the knowledge of the Jew deep in the hearts of our youth from their childhood on. No one among our people should or may grow up without learning the true depravity and danger of the Jew.

(ibid.)

5. Children's Books Propagating Antisemitism

Beyond teacher training, classroom instruction also became openly polarizing, as texts explicitly “educated” students in the differences between Germans and Jews and, what is worse, on the “dangers” of Jews to German society. One example of antisemitic literature that made its way into classrooms for reading instruction was the children’s book, *Der Giftpilz* (The Poisonous Mushroom). Featuring colorful illustrations and short, virulently antisemitic stories, the book equated Jews with poisonous mushrooms and explained to children—in a number of stories—how to recognize a Jew, the dangers of Jews, the “exploitative” history of Jews among German peoples, and how to protect oneself from Jews. Here, we see the book’s cover:



(Translation: “The Poisonous Mushroom: Tales by Ernst Zimmer, Images by Fips,” cited in Randall Bytwerk, ed., *Der Giftpilz*. research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/thumb.htm, accessed Dec. 31, 2023)

6. Ideology Within Educational Materials

The shift in curriculum that accompanied the Nazis' rise in ascendancy appears in memoirs from the time. Here, we read the memories of a former member of the girls' version of the Hitler Youth, the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (Band of German Girls):

By 1936 most textbooks parroted Nazi ideology. Even the problems in our arithmetic exercise book had ideological content: "The inmate of a mental hospital costs the state 5-20 marks a day. How much does that come to in a month? A year?" The comment my teacher offered, of course, was, "All hereditary illnesses are a heavy burden for the community." I never heard her justify euthanasia or sterilization as a solution, but that was certainly the implication. Academic subjects became contaminated by ideology and diluted by indoctrination. [...] As instructional material and entertainment for the Hitler Youth, Nazi publishers (and soon most publishing houses) favored fairy tales and sagas, Germanic myth and heroic epics [...]. And of course the heroic feats of "our soldiers" in the two world wars and the treachery of "our enemies" formed the plots of much juvenile literature.

(Ursula Mahlendorf, *The Shame of Survival: Working Through a Nazi Childhood*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 2010, p. 97)

7. Antisemitism in Exams and Activities

This antisemitic curriculum included not only books, but also exam questions and exercises from class. Here, we see the antisemitic ideology infusing such learning materials:

A bomber aircraft on take-off carries 12 dozen bombs, each weighing 10 kilos. The aircraft takes off for Warsaw the international centre for Jewry. It bombs the town. On take-off with all bombs on board and a fuel tank containing 100 kilos of fuel, the aircraft weighed about 8 tons. When it returns from the crusade, there are still 230 kilos left. What is the weight of the aircraft when empty?

(C.N. Trueman, "Nazi Education," *History Learning Site*, Mar. 9, 2015, www.historylearningsite.co.uk/nazi-germany/nazi-education, accessed Dec. 31, 2023)

And from a math workbook:

The Jews are aliens in Germany – in 1933 there were 66,060,000 inhabitants in the German Reich, of whom 499,682 were Jews. What is the percent of aliens?

(Nico Voigtländer and Hans-Joachim Voth, "Taught to Hate: How Nazi Schooling Amplified anti-Semitism in Germany," *CEPR*, Jun. 18, 2015, cepr.org/voxeu/columns/taught-hate-how-nazi-schooling-amplified-anti-semitism-germany, accessed Dec. 31, 2023)

8. Science Curriculum Used to Support Antisemitic and Racist Ideologies

Biology was of great importance in the Third Reich; the discipline framed and rationalized racial agendas in the language of science and technology. Lisa Pine, historian of Nazi education, describes the changes to biology instruction made by Paul Brohmer, one of the leading writers of a new biology curriculum:

Biology lessons became vehicles for Nazi racial doctrine, emphasizing themes such as race, heredity, and “election of the fittest.” Pupils were instructed in the classification of racial types and craniology... The realization of the hereditary health of the German people was to be “drummed into” children in school education so that it became “second nature to them.” Lore of the family, lore of race, genetics, eugenics, and population policy formed the core of “hereditary biology.” This subject purported to demonstrate that “racial mixing” and an increase in the number of the “hereditarily ill” damaged the integrity and value of the German population... Pupils were given an understanding of the need for sterilization and of Nazi eugenics laws.... In 1938, Alfred Vogel, a biology curriculum writer and primary school headmaster in Baden, produced a series of anti-Semitic teaching charts designed as teaching aids to the new curriculum... These accompanied a teachers’ book designed for the instruction of “biology” to primary school children. Vogel encouraged teachers to instruct children about laws of nature and heredity, as well as racial consciousness and the “blood community” of the German nation. He drew parallels between cross-breeding in plant biology and “racial mixing” in society. Vogel advocated a “race corner” in the school grounds that could be used to carry out experiments on plants and allow pupils to see the strength of the “pure bred” plant over the mixed-bred one. The inferences from this were applied to human society. Vogel examined “hidden” inherited tendencies in biology, claiming that it was not correct to judge a living thing from its outwardly visible characteristics. The implication of this was that heredity was the only important signifier of race, so that a Jew posed a danger to the German nation even if he did not look like a Jew or did not practice his religion.

Topics for biology instruction included: “the heredity of physical characteristics,” “the heredity of mental and spiritual characteristics,” “the heredity of frailties and illnesses,” “the heredity of physical and spiritual characteristics of the German race,” “the care of racial inheritance,” “the law of selection” and “the Jews and the German people.” Vogel advocated the need to educate young Germans about “the racial value of our people and the tireless struggle over the preservation of our racial character” and about “the complete rejection of the Jew”. His illustrated charts [included] “The Racial Composition of the Jews” and “German Ways - Jewish Ways” . . . and stereotyped the Jews, both as stateless intruders and as financial and political dominators.”

(Lisa Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010, p. 44) (For charts, see Gregory Wegner, ‘Schooling for a New Mythos: Race, Anti-Semitism and the Curriculum Materials of a Nazi Race Educator’, *Paedagogica Historica*, Vol. XXVII, 1992, p. 197)

9. Ancestry Charts

And here we see an excerpt from a German schoolgirl's notebook, in which she calculates the percentage of Jewish blood in the descendents of "mixed" heritage. This was likely from a eugenics or racial studies class, or perhaps mathematics:



Translation: "Explanation of the Law for Reich Citizenship: Whoever has at least 3 fully Jewish grandparents is a Jew. Whoever has 2 fully Jewish grandparents is a Jewish hybrid. However, this person is Jewish if he either belongs to a Jewish religious community or marries a Jew. German: [Blank box]; Jew: [Striped box]"

(The Wiener Holocaust Library, "Educational Resources: Childhood in Nazi Germany," <https://dsvfmvr182ibt.cloudfront.net/prod/uploads/2020/02/Childhood-in-Nazi-Germany-1.pdf>, accessed Dec. 31, 2023)

10. Emphasis on German-ness in Curriculum

At the same time, textbooks and teaching materials underscored the unity and essence of the German *Volk* (people), often in language connected to themes of blood and soil. Here is an excerpt from the preface of a German grammar book:

Whatever moves the soul of a people, in joy and sorrow, in meditation and battle, in creation and festivity, vibrates in unison with the entire curriculum, and by no means least in the teaching of language. Here, too, it is a matter of coinciding with life itself! Proximity to the present! Relation to the people! For that reason let us also give utterance to the mighty events of the time in our lessons in German! That which fills the heart of the pole is spilled by the tongue of youth! The scream of strong blood-folk thought, feeling, and will must be permitted to flow, warm with life, into the form of the word. The result will be a teaching of folk-culture in the mother tongue; we must make this live and be watchful in the growing generation, so that this may, with its own treasure of words belonging to our day and age, express the new treasure of thought, gather it into itself, and let it root ever deep in the German essence, growing ever more deeply rooted, growing ever more into the German mode of thought, the German mode of living, and the German view of the world.

(Cited in Erika Mann and Thomas Mann, *School for Barbarians: Education under the Nazis*, Mineola: Dover Publications, 2014. pp. 64-65)

11. Curriculum Designed to Serve the State

Nazi educational policies and directives emphasized collective ethnic and national identity, explicitly rejecting rationalist principles. Here is a 1940 Nazi directive for elementary education:

It is not the task of the elementary school to import a multiplicity of knowledge for the personal use of the individual. It has to develop and harness all physical and mental powers of youth for the service of the people and the state. Therefore, the only subject that has any place in the school curriculum is that which is necessary to achieve this aim. All other subjects, springing from obsolete educational ideas, must be discarded.

(Cited in Samuel, R. H. and Thomas Hinton, *Education and Society in Modern Germany*, Routledge, 2013, p. 83)

12. Teachers Openly Hostile towards Jews

The increasingly dominant antisemitism throughout Germany soon affected the interactions between Jewish and non-Jewish children at school. A child during the rise of the Nazis and ever-increasing, overt antisemitism, Kurt Klein explains how the other children's attitudes towards him, as a Jew, evolved over the years when he was in school.

There was [...] a gradual alienation with my non-Jewish friends and classmates. And whereas in the beginning they were almost apologetic about it, and saying things such as, "Well, Hitler doesn't mean people like you, really, or your parents, but you will admit there are certain Jews who really deserve to get Hitler's wrath. [...]" This soon turned into a real taunting of Jewish boys and girls, [...] and gradually they even stopped talking to us altogether. [...] [I]t was a totally shattering experience for me to find that all these people were turning away from me, and what was even worse, that some teachers were espousing that same [antisemitic] ideology. For instance, I remember a gym teacher of ours giving a lecture once in class to the effect of—this is as close to what he said as I can remember: "There are certain elements among us here who are merely guests in this country. They will be treated OK as long as they behave themselves. But unfortunately they have not always behaved themselves, and therefore we cannot guarantee what will happen to them." I mean, this completely undid me, and not because perhaps even of the content, but because I could see that the Nazis were reaching everybody, not only my classmates.

("Changes at School Under the Nazis," *Facing History & Ourselves*, Apr. 7, 2022, www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/changes-school-under-nazis, accessed Dec. 31, 2023)

13. Teachers Require Jewish Students to Publicly Identify Themselves

In some instances, teachers did more than merely teach about "racial" differences; they publicly identified and humiliated their Jewish students, thereby further polarizing the classroom among "racial" groups³:

We had a history teacher who was a very committed National Socialist, and we had four Jewish pupils. And they had to stand up during the class, they weren't allowed to sit down. And one after the other they disappeared, until none were left, but nobody thought much about it. We were told they had moved.... We were told all the time that first the Jews are a lower kind of human being, and then the Poles are inferior, and anyone who wasn't Nordic was worthless.

(Hedwig Ertl, cited in "Jewish Children in the Nazi Classroom," *Spartacus Educational*, spartacus-educational.com/Jewish_Children.htm, Accessed Dec. 31, 2023)

³ Here, we use the term "racial" only to underscore that this is the way in which German politicians, educators, and teachers articulated the difference between Jews and non-Jewish Germans.

14. Teachers Ask Students to Identify Themselves

Here we see more evidence of teachers' requiring students to publicly identify themselves by "race." Rita Kuhn recalls her experience in 1934 as a five-year-old: "[...] the teacher had to ask the whole class who's Jewish. I looked around the classroom and nobody raised [a] hand.... I wasn't really *sure* whether I was Jewish.... I raised my hand, because...I knew I had *something* to do with being Jewish"

(Cited in Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany*, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 98)

15. Students Tasked to Write Only "Acceptable" Opinions

Rather than focus on developing critical thinking skills or relevant content knowledge, students were also forced to complete homework that reflected one ideology: the Nazi ideology. As one mother recalls: "There were...compositions with delicate subjects, and they [the students] were not allowed to put down a contradictory opinion. Sometimes a judicious teacher gave a selection of subjects...but all the children knew what they were expected to write. It was bad enough that this kind of state's education taught them to hate, to despise, to be suspicious, to denounce, but worst of all perhaps was this...lying."

(Cited in Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany*, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 100-101)

16. Teachers Openly Teach About Racial Hierarchies

Over time, teachers became more and more overt in their education about racial differences and concepts of racial "superiority." As this one rabbi recalls, the tenor in classrooms changed dramatically after Hitler came to power in 1933:

A new course of study was introduced in school in the early 1930s called *Rassenkunde* (race knowledge). The teacher wanted to spare me from being in class when he would teach this subject. Therefore, he taught it on Saturdays when I did not attend school. One day, another teacher explained in class, "I want to show you how a Jew looks." Of course, I, the only Jew present, was to be his sample. "You can recognize a Jew simply by his features," he said. "A German, a Nordic, is tall, has blond hair, blue eyes, a straight nose, and detached ear lobes [*sic*]. A Jew is short and stocky, has dark eyes, a crooked nose, and his earlobes are tied to the skin."

"Oh, no, sir," I replied. "You are wrong. I also have blue eyes and detached earlobes."

That did not stop him from making further statements about Jews. "Every person on earth belongs to a race. The Jews are no religion, no ethnic or cultural group; they are a race

like everyone else. Now, there are superior and inferior races. We, the Nordic, the Aryan, are the superiors. The Poles, the Gypsies, and the lowest, the Jews, are all inferiors.”

(Rabbi Jacob G. Wiener, “A Student in a Nazi School,” The United States Holocaust Museum, <https://www.ushmm.org/remember/holocaust-reflections-testimonies/echoes-of-memory/a-student-in-a-nazi-school>, Oct. 19, 2008, accessed Dec. 31, 2023)

17. Race Studies Mandated

Soon race studies became a mandatory subject in all classes, and heavy emphasis was given to family, community, ancestry, genealogy, and family trees. Here we see the cover of a classroom textbook from the time, *Races: ABC*:



(The Wiener Holocaust Library, “A is for Adolf: Teaching German Children Nazi Values,” <https://wienerholocaustlibrary.org/exhibition/a-is-for-adolf-teaching-german-children-nazi-values-2/>, accessed Dec. 31, 2023)

18. History Curriculum Rewritten to Underscore Ideology

History curriculum was entirely rewritten, as described by Lisa Pine, historian of Nazi education:

There was a flurry of activity in writing a new history curriculum in Nazi Germany. Publishers, university professors, teachers and school administrators became involved in this process, often in the pursuit of professional advancement. Dieter Klagges was one of the key history curriculum writers of the Nazi era, underlining the significance of German blood in history teaching. He developed the themes of racial purity and anti-Semitism in his writings (for example, see Klagges, *Geschichte als nationalpolitische Erziehung*). Johann von Leers used history stories as a means of portraying anti-Semitic ideas to young children, stressing the profiteering of the Jews at the expense of Germans and depicting Jews as ‘swindlers’ and ‘crooks’ (see J. von Leers, *Für das Reich: Deutsche Geschichte in Geschichtserzählungen*, Leipzig, 1940).

(Lisa Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010, p. 51)

19. Students Punished for the Wrong Political Views

The polarization of classrooms occurred not only along racial lines, but also along political lines, as students turned against each other for espousing the “wrong” political views. Here, we read about an incident in 1940 in which a 14-year-old German boy was caught scribbling a drawing of Hitler on his desk:

One morning, quite by chance, I was in school a quarter of an hour before lessons began. Sitting around in the classroom and staring out at the dingy winter morning, I took out my pocketknife and without thinking carved the same Hitler caricature, which for some time I had been scribbling on walls and fences, on my desk.

Luckily, Gerd Donner [a classmate] was the first to come into the classroom after me. Taking one glance at the desk he hissed quietly, and with the instinct for survival of a boy from the back alleys of the East End of Berlin, “Get rid of that immediately!” Without waiting for my reaction, he took out his own pocketknife and began to remove small splinters of varnish from the surface of the desk. Meanwhile, the rest of the class arrived, the room filled up; some came up to the desk and in what was left could just about discern the outlines of the familiar caricature. In the commotion that arose, Gerd Donner threatened that anyone who reported anything would be in big trouble.

Dr. Appelt [the teacher] had barely entered the classroom when, to everyone’s astonishment, one of the pupils rose to his feet and reported me “as duty required” and as he had learned as a leader in the Hitler Youth. When he had finished, the teacher came over to me, shaking his head in disgust, bent over to inspect the desk, was aghast at what he saw, shook his head once more, and finally told me to follow him to the rector after the

lesson. There I was subjected to a brief interrogation and the next day questioned by a policeman called to the school for that specific purpose.

[After that day some] classmates also conspicuously withdrew from me. For the first time I had an inkling of what it meant to be excluded. Dr. Appelt clearly agreed with the disrepute into which I had fallen, and from then on he seemed to regard every moment of inattention and every disruption for which I was to blame as the action of a good-for-nothing, who was politically and humanly a bad egg.

(Joachim Fest, *Not I: Memoirs of a German Childhood*, New York City: Other Press, 2014, pp. 172-174)

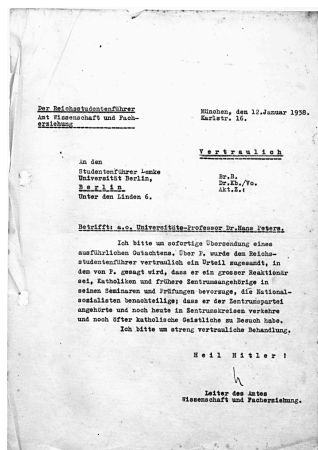
20. Students Report Others for Having the Wrong Political Views

Students also turned against and reported teachers for not conforming to Nazi ideology. As stated in a display of these letters in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,

To fill the gaps in surveillance, the Third Reich also relied on ordinary citizens informing on one another. This system rewarded individuals willing to report the activities of those who opposed the regime. It also promoted denunciation as a way for citizens to settle scores with rivals or to eliminate competitors in the workplace [...] Politically ambitious students sometimes used denunciations to attack professors in order to improve their own career prospects. This type of behavior was tolerated and even encouraged in an academic setting that privileged political reliability over academic performance.

(United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Request for the Investigation of Professor Hans Peters,” <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/request-for-the-investigation-of-professor-hans-peters>, accessed Dec. 15, 2023)

Here is a 1938 letter responding to a university student’s report on a professor:



[Translation:]

The Leader of the Reich Students' Union Munich, January 12, 1938

Office for Academic Disciplines and Specialty Training Confidential, Karlstr. 16

Student Leader Lemke Br.B University of Berlin Dr.Kb./Vo. Berlin File reference: z
Unter den Linden 6

Re: University Associate Professor Hans Peters

I request that you immediately send me a detailed report.

The *Reichsstudentenführer* has received a confidential opinion on P., in which it is stated that he is a great reactionary, shows preference in his classes to Catholics and former member of the Center [Party], and discriminates against National Socialists; further, that he belonged to the Center Party and continues to travel in Center Party circles and frequently has members of the Catholic clergy as visitors.

I ask that this be dealt with as a strictly confidential matter.

Heil Hitler!

Head of the Office for Academic Disciplines and Specialty Training

(ibid.)

21. Curriculum Focuses on Identifying Jews

In 1938, Jewish children were segregated from the German students and placed in their own schools at the expense of the Jewish community. In 1942, these Jewish schools were closed. Solomon Perel, born in 1925, survived the Holocaust by pretending to be an orphaned ethnic German, joining the Hitler Youth. In his memoir, he tells of his experience attending school with the Germans:

Now, decades later, I have to try hard to recall the things I was forced to memorize in those days. To do this I have to shut myself off from the outside world, close my eyes, stroke my chin... and go back in time until I'm in the classroom again, sitting in my seat in the middle row. I have a stomach-ache, cramps, just as I did then. I am seventeen years old again, tensely sitting among the other students, wearing my swastika-adorned uniform, waiting. Soon the door will open and the Race Studies teacher will walk in. He is young, has short blond hair, and wears thin, gold-metal-rimmed eyeglasses. He wears a brown SA uniform and black boots. The students jump up, stand stiff-backed, raise their right arms, and yell as if with one voice, "*Heil Hitler!*" Then they sit down again, straining forward, silent, motionless, their eyes fixed on the teacher. The silence that drags on for minutes is unbearable. The air crackles with tension.

Calmly the teacher opens his textbook; slowly he looks around, checks attendance, makes some notes. And then the lesson begins.

The dogma he is espousing—all directed against my people—makes me want to scream. I remain in my seat, a prisoner; I wait impatiently for the bell to ring, to liberate me. During the break I keep to myself, trying to calm down before the next class.

How could I have sat there among them learning about laws that were meant to drain the lifeblood from the Jewish people? How did I keep my sanity? Perhaps I simply did not realize how loathsome the situation was in which I found myself. I suffered from chronic persecution anxiety. Whenever someone unexpectedly called my name, or if I was told to report to one of my superiors, it immediately triggered the alarming and terrible thought that my last hour had struck. Every stranger was a possible Gestapo officer, come to arrest me.

Almost all the things I was taught frightened and shocked me. One of the chapters in the textbooks was titled “Characteristic and Distinguishing Features of Jews.” The objective of the lesson was to teach us “how to recognize your enemy.” On one of the walls of the classroom hung enlarged photographs of Jewish faces, in profile and full-face. There was also a drawing of “The Eternal Jew,” a shrunken man leaning on a walking stick, wearing tattered clothes and carrying a pack of rags on his back. The caption said “This is how they came to Germany from the East...” The next picture showed the same Jew, but this time he had a fat belly, was splendidly dressed, wore gold and diamond jewelry, and held a cigar between his craftily smiling lips. A German peasant was writhing beneath one of the Jew’s feet. This time the caption read “...and this is what they became in our midst.”

(Solomon Perel, *Europa, Europa: A Memoir of WWII*. Brisbane: John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd., 1999, p. 93)

22. Theories Presented in Curriculum Become Practice

Immediately after Germany’s defeat, Solomon Perel met Manfred Frankel, another Jew who had survived the Holocaust, and learned for the first time the connection between theory and practice:

He was the first one to tell me about the place of horror called Auschwitz, and the gas chambers, the crematoria, and the atrocities that were committed there.

Our conversation left me speechless. I had lived among the Nazis for four years and never heard about any of this. How could I not have realized that they would implement in the most gruesome ways what they had taught us about liquidating the Jews, “this people of parasites and bloodsuckers”? Had my German classmates heard about the Nazi crimes from their parents and just not talked about it? Had there been a conspiracy of silence? Our teachers knew the horrible dimensions of the mass murders, but under the generally prevailing conditions of concealment they didn’t discuss this in class. They contented themselves with presenting only the theoretical desirability of the eradication of the Jews...

In contrast to the official silence about the extermination camps, Goebbels' propaganda had made a big to-do about the discovery of a mass grave of Polish officers near Katyn. "How can the world just shut its eyes to this massacre committed by the Bolsheviks?" was the cynical questions asked by the murderers of millions of human beings. They never mentioned their own crimes. Although I learned about the Nazi racial theories in the ideological hothouse of the Hitler Youth school, my mind refused to acknowledge that these theories were already being applied in the various death camps.

(ibid. p. 191)