

Growing Volkish Identity in the Third Reich

Anti-Semitism and Schooling Under the Third Reich Gregory Paul Wegner
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reviewed by Brian Lee Knutson and Keith A. Knutson

The story of National Socialism's role in the encouragement and nurturing of German volkish identity is a wildly violent tale of an exaggerated sense of superiority and brutal racial hatred. The Nazi racial myth is given form and content in word, but was implemented through the language of blood. Much of the Nazi story is, in fact, told in «fictional terminology» lacking concise accuracy and meaning, and is seemingly legitimized simply by its repetitive use. The «Aryan» myth grew out of linguistic terminology coined by the Frenchman Comte Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882); terminology which was «decontextualized» into the biological, physical reality of «blood and soil». The Nazi interpretations of nineteenth century Darwinian evolution, of the biological eugenics of Francis Galton (1822-1911), of German Kaiser Reich imperial ambitions, and of terminology borrowed from the study of languages by Gobineau and other linguists of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, contributed to the culmination of the Aryan myth taking shape in the radical institutionalization of the Nazi racial state. The myth of racial superiority, which the Nazis embodied in tales of «blood and soil», required for its completion the opposition labeling of the «inferior races». The Nazi categorization of the «negative other» provided targets for «scapegoating» and the stroking of fear and hatred; as the «enemy» of the Aryan volk, they served as the necessary dichotic component characterizing the maniacal Nazi project. The German volk~ so the argument went, required lebens raum, or living space, and thus the ambitious, expansive Nazi gaze fell upon Eastern Europe and its «inferior», non-German populations. The German dream of empire and territorial expansion was justified in the Nazi myth making process and proved reason enough (along with geopolitical interests in natural resources such as oil) for the Nazi militarist drive to aggression and war.

And so the Nazi totalitarian regime named their targets. The Nazis took intentional aim at several populations including Russians, Poles, Slavs, Sind, and Roma; as well as members of domestic political opposition or competing ideologies such as Social Democrats, Communists, Freemasons, even Jesuits and the Catholic Church; all of whom were forced by the Nazis «to contribute» to prisoner rosters in concentration camps such as Dachau as early as March 1933. But primarily, and with murderous

genocidal intent, the Nazis marked and went after the Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness. The rejection and removal of European Jewry was core to the Nazi world view.

The Nazi compression of German history into the rubric of racial mythology managed two important, if perverse, achievements. The myth makers expanded the metaphor of their hate by «secularizing» centuries-long traditions of religious contempt for Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness; they then clothed and draped these traditional hatreds and prejudices in what the Nazis presumed was legitimizing, pseudoscientific jargon. The terminology gave shape and appearance to the Nazi language of blood; it took form and developed content in the racial conceptualization of the German Volk. In following the distinctive nature of categories and the tension that rises between them, the exclusiveness of being us, versus them, created fertile mental terrain for the Nazi manipulators of fear and hatred. The Aryan racial identity was nurtured on this hatred against the Jew as inferior, and yet dangerous, outsider.

The Jew was the quintessential «negative other». The Jew, Judaism, and Jewishness was that which must be sub-humanized, de-humanized; was that which must be gotten rid of - in a word, *vernichtung*, or annihilated. Yet, how does the state legitimize and justify such racial violence and brutal hatred? How does the state impose such concepts? How does the state formulate and present such impositions? Indeed, how do such concepts convince the adult thinkers doing the teaching, let alone be put into educational curriculums and taught to the young? Gregory Paul Wegner explores such questions in his admirably researched and carefully examined investigation of curriculum, textbooks, and personages in the public school system under the Third Reich.

The Nazi role in education, as in all things under the totalitarian regime, was implemented by the party and dictated by the will of the Fuehrer. The Nazi educative goal was the growing of German Volkish identity, and the insistence upon unquestioned obedience and self-sacrificing commitment to the Third Reich. Language, the foundational element in nurturing thought and perception, was corrupted by the Nazis into an overly emotive endeavor applied to the instructional task. It was a task involving various social institutions of peculiar Nazi character, such as the Hitler Youth and *Schutzstaffel* (SS) programs. Wegner acknowledges this broader institutional context, and recognizes the need and fertile ground for further research into the roles of both organizations; but that is another story for another book. In this inquiry, Wegner focuses primarily on the public education system, the *Volksschule*, and the manner in which Nazi racial language permeated the full curriculum and textbooks regardless of subject matter or topic.

This general integration of race and race hygiene into the school curriculum reflected the infectious manner in which Nazi terminology permeated the full society. To this point, Wegner refers to the work of Victor Klemperer to illustrate the fundamental influence of Nazi language upon German society. Victor Klemperer, decorated World War I veteran, university professor, converted Jew, and married to an «Aryan» wife with whom he lived, suffered, and survived the Nazi terror (as well as the Allied firebombing of Dresden), wrote of the Nazi penchant for clichés; of their tone of fear; and of the ever present threat of violent horror. He wrote as one who had experienced the intimidation of Nazi howlers snapping their orders and barking their commands. And he wrote of the role such intimidation played in establishing the Nazi ideals of «lockstep conformity» and obedience under *Gleichschaltung*, meaning «coordination» or «meshing of the gears». The persuasiveness of such control over and through

language speaks to the degree of political control and domination the Nazis acquired over German society in the twelve year duration of the Third Reich. In reading and learning more about Victor Klemperer, in reading his diaries and notebooks, the image of a Noam Chomsky-like character takes shape. They speak to the role of the intellectual in society, which can be a challenging position under fascist totalitarian regimes.

Wegner draws on Klemperer's telling of this shift in social discourse as one of movement away from *Gruppensprache*, or language of specific interests, and towards *Volkssprache*, which Klemperer called the *Lingua Tertii Imperii* and understood to encompass «the entirety of life» in the racial community. It was this Nazi *Volkssprache* that seized all public and private areas of life, from politics and justice to the economy, the arts, and the sciences, to sports, family, and schools, even down to kindergartens and nurseries. It was this Nazi language and expressive terminology that remained key to the educational agenda, much as ruthlessness and cruelty remained key to the terror system and police state. In language the regime sought to ensure the Volkish identity and implement their definition of the educated Nazi person; and in so doing, they secured the basic way of thinking in Nazi society, that is, to think the same way. Fear of and the surveillance by the totalitarian regime insured its rule and its control would be adhered to and obeyed.

The first year and a half of Nazi rule witnessed wild street violence on the part of Ernst Roehm and his *Schutzabteilung*, SA, brown shirt storm troopers. These were the uniformed and armed political combat troops of the Nazi party and represented the main instrument of the Nazis in their undermining of the Weimar democracy. And how quick, you might ask, could the Nazi language grow recruits? They numbered some 15,000 when they began to organize in 1923; by 1933 they had grown to 400,000; and in 1934 they claimed a membership of some 2.5 million. They consisted largely of veterans and laborers (many of whom were unemployed), but there were also significant numbers of students, fraternity members, and faculty signing up to partake in the violence. One might imagine the «bier-drunk and weiss-wursted» brown shirts, fired up on sharp mustard and several liters too much bier, pouring out into the streets, beating up defenseless people, throwing bricks and lit torches through Jewish shop windows, and onward the fascists would march, back to school carrying the terror into lecture halls of liberal professors and libraries, even burning the books! But of course they were encouraged in doing so, in order to «save» the German state by striking out at its enemies with physical violence. The SA were a force to be feared; and indeed, they proved useful to the Nazis transition to power.

Over the course of 1933, the Nazi regime was beginning their revamping of German society. They were quickly passing legislation aimed at revoking the emancipation of Jews. Indeed, the month of April 1933 alone witnessed three major laws enacted, including the *Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service*, which contained the «*arierparagraph*» barring Jews from holding positions as judges, lawyers, doctors, and teachers. These legal and constitutional limitations placed on Jews emboldened the outrageous biological assumptions and hatred and fueled the street violence of the rampaging SA forces. Not surprisingly, it soon cycled out of control.

On the command of Hitler and the rightist faction of the party, it came to a «halt» (at least temporarily) on 30 June 1934, with the «Night of the Long Knives» in which more than one hundred of the SA leadership, including Roehm, were assassinated at the hands of the SS. It also signaled the fall of a prominent German academician who comes to mind when considering the role of education and

intellectuals in society. Although Wegner does not make mention of him, the affair marked the demise of Martin Heidegger's bid to take a leading role in the SA movement, and his influence in the formulation of Nazi education policy. Heidegger, who had been named Rector at the University of Friburg by Hitler in 1933, had actively saddled up with Roehm and the student movement within the SA; and after the fall, while sufficiently antidemocratic in his commitment to fascism, his commitment to Nazi racist ideas came into question by the anti-intellectual faction in the party. Although he did survive and continued to be tolerated, he was effectively sidelined in favor of his colleague in the *Union of German Academics*, Ernst Krieck. It would be Krieck (1882-1947) and not Heidegger, determining the role of educators in the Nazi regime; as it would be the SS, and not the SA (although they would be called upon to participate in the November 1938 pogrom of *Kristallnacht*), determining and directing the coming violence of Nazi total war against Jews (numbering some 6 million souls lost) within Nazi total war against the world (culminating in the loss of an estimated 50 million lives).

Others moving in the upper circles of Nazi bureaucracy with Krieck, and of whom Wegner does make mention, were Johann von Leers, Alfred Rosenberg, Phillip Bouhler, and Ernst Dober, all of whom contributed to developing the pantheon of Nazi «faith heroes» which focused on biological stereotypes as a means to advance the Aryan myth. We meet Julius Streicher of the independent publishing house, *Der Stuermer*, which published the Nazi children's classics *Der Giftpilz* (The Poisonous Mushroom) in 1938 and *Der Pudelmopsdackelpinscher and andere besinnlicbe Erzählungen* (The poodle-pug-dachshund-pinscher and other contemplative stories) in 1940 by Ernst Hiemer. Another of Streicher's authors was Elvira Bauer who wrote *Trau keinem Jud auf gruner Heid* (Trust no Fox on the green Heath) in 1936, which called for a complete purge of Jewish students from the Volksschule two years before it would finally happen.

The earliest Nazi curriculum policy statement to reach school administrators was issued in August 1933. It emphasized that race biology should be applied to all disciplines as an integrated perspective. But as Wegner points out, there was a time lag of about five years between the drafting of such guidelines to address immediate short term needs of advancing their conceptions of race and racial hygiene, and the appearance of new, Nazified textbooks in the classrooms beginning in 1938. This five year lag perhaps appeared as a calm before the storm; yet while resembling a calm, it was not a period without distress. For as the Nazis were preparing their textbooks: they were also honing their technological skills at surprising, detaining, incarcerating, and killing. Indeed the Nazi concentration camp system was being established well before the ink on the first textbooks was dry. These concentration camps facilitated the removal of socially undesirables; they filled the Nazi camps, marked and identified by the colored-coded *winkel*, or triangle badge. We all know the infamous yellow for Jews, two triangles composing the Star of David, one of which must be yellow; other colors included red for political prisoners, pink for homosexuals, purple for Jehovah's Witnesses, green for criminals, brown for Sinti or Roma (Gypsies), black for asocial, and blue for illegal emigrants. By September 1942, all Jews anywhere in Germany and German occupied territories were required to wear the yellow star. The physical marking by badge or clothing had medieval roots, but the Nazi rendition on this theme was as all things Nazi are - that is, extreme.

During the mid-1930s the Nazi regime continued to press for legislation revoking Jewish protections. The Nazis restricted Jewish movement and access to jobs and schools. The Nuremberg Laws of November 1935 finally excluded Jews outright, forbidding marriage and other contractual agreements

between Jews and Germans, and forbidding Jews to fly the German flag. With the creation of the Kaiser Reich in 1870 had come the emancipation of the Jewish community and the extension of full citizenship. At that time, Jews represented about 1 % of the total German population, numbering some 600,000 mostly concentrated in larger towns and cities. From November 1935 onward the already low Jewish population would get only get smaller.

Despite such proportionally small numbers, the racial element of volkish consciousness was a pivotal aspect of the Nazi world view and permeated all subjects within the Third Reich's educational system. Wegner shows us this was particularly the case in revamping of curriculum and textbooks along racial hatred lines. The seminal source for the educative role of race was Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, where the stateless, wandering Jew - with a millennium and more of pariah status based on religious, cultural, political, and legal grounds, and even on dietary grounds - faced the full attack from the Nazi state on racial grounds.

The ministry level planners, guideline architects, and censors of curriculum materials worked hard to coordinate and spread the racial themes across the curriculum. Wegner's presentation outlines the major players and authors, as well as the textbooks and the intriguing illustrations (here his book has wonderful replications), that were used in the task of spreading the Nazi message. The extreme to which race was laced through the curriculum textbooks and fields of study is difficult to understate. History, geography, and children's literature all underwent ideological retooling, and Wegner's review of the interdisciplinary connections indicates the permeating nature of racial consciousness. The Nazis believed that biological studies, race hygiene, and blood purity evoked commitment to German identity while vilifying Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness. They believed that physical characteristics of the races gave insights into their moral character. The mythologized cross-over of knowing the other by such outward appearance was carried into history studies, geography, and even physical training. The will to act and obey commands, and to do so in physical fitness, was the highest Nazi attribute. To contemplate and question was misguided. Obedience was demanded, and racial identity was fact. The irrational nature of such racial mythology illustrates the Nazi taste for recasting, even falsifying, history. One's depth of understanding was not a measure of the intellect, but rather a commitment of faith, a conviction of belief, and a reliance on fictional terminology.

The language and terminology used by the Nazis as they mythologized race, grew out of eighteenth century linguistic studies. Their use in racial contexts was inappropriate, and remains so today. Terms like «Aryan» and «Semite» hold no biological reality or identity. So let us state it plainly, we need to be freed from their misapplication. As early as 1873, when the Hamburg journalist Wilheem Marr (who, it is interesting to note, was thrice married to women of Jewish heritage) coined the term «anti-Semitic» as meaning anti-jewish resentment, the «Jewish Question» was a prominent issue of social discourse. Indeed, the appearance of «Social Questions» arose contemporaneously around the globe. In late nineteenth century America it was the «Indian Question», the «Chinese Question», or the Negro Question». The same can be said of Brazil and other Latin American countries, and in fact throughout much of the remnants of Luso-Iberian empire.

The terms «Aryan» and «Semite» confer little understanding in our contemporary modern reality; and indeed it can be argued that they grow even less informative in the distance between the opposing sides in dialogue. Why do we retain them, use them, repeat them? «Aryan» and «Caucasian» are

terms with story lines more imagined than factually traced back to Indo-European language roots; and they echo with a certain tinniness of attempted Nixonian categorization. They offer little of use in terms of establishing racial bloodlines.

The term «Semitic» was coined in 1781 by the German historian A.L. Schlozer. The linguistic investigations of «Semitic» languages number some sixty to seventy different entries, most being long dead. Those included among the «living» Semitic languages include Neo-Syriac, Arabic, and Hebrew. Building upon Gobineau's misguided racial ideas, Wilhelm Marr, Adolf Hitler, and others misused the derivative term «anti-Semitic»; they were wrong in their hate, as well as in their use of the term. As Wegner observes, the Nazi regime did attempt to correct the «error» throughout the 1930s; no doubt as much out of geopolitical considerations of natural resources, like oil, as out of any moral quibbling on the part of Nazis. They proffered terms like *Judengegner*, *Yudenfeind*, and *Yudenhass*, or spoke in terms of the *Yudenfrage*.

And yet there remains the insistence on retaining and using «antisemitism», even while many recognize its limitations and inappropriateness . It is necessary to remind ourselves that while Jews are Semitic speakers; not all Semitic speakers are Jews. This stands as logical fact, the habit of misuse notwithstanding. The hatred directed at Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness - given the contemporary state of affairs in the Middle East - requires the recognition that Arab and Hebrew are both Semitic languages. We can speak of them as being distinctive languages within the Semitic linguistic group; or even as being distinctive cultures; but it remains simply fictive fuddle to speak in terms of racial distinction To speak of Arab antisemites is a misnomer and self-contradictory.

This, of course, goes straight to the issue and title of Wegner's admirable inquiry. It is «racial hatred and schooling» that grounds the work. It is antijewish hatred and respectfully, the Shoah, which are the human horrors that the Nazi racial state perpetrated. We will do well never to forget the horrors and the terrors of total war. But we owe ourselves, our students, and the pursuit of human understanding, the honesty to demand more accurate terminology which will eliminate the blurred and confused claims of racial appellation.

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