

Article

# 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 Hitler<sup>1</sup>

In 1976, the historian Daniel Horn published a pioneering article on the education system of National Socialist Germany, addressing a central aspect of Nazi schooling that most scholars up to then had overlooked or at least had not fully taken into account:

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

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*.”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> However, Horn’s examination of what actually happened during the period 1933–1945 showed that German schools were 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 anarchistic and nihilist behavior of the adolescent Red Guards during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the rebellion “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.”<sup>5</sup>

These findings went against the grain not only of the traditional view of National Socialist education in historical scholarship at the time,<sup>6</sup> 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 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.<sup>7</sup>

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, and the Swedish education system 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 we will show,

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

<sup>3</sup> Peukert Detlev, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Lisa Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany* (New York, NY: Berg, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Frank Dikötter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People’s History, 1962–76* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

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

<sup>6</sup> See 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). For German sources, see 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. Pedagogik des Nationalsozialismus* (Munich: List, 1964); Karl Christoph Lingelbach, *Erziehung und Erziehungstheorien im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland* (Weinheim: Beltz, 1970).

<sup>7</sup> For such Holocaust explanations, see 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).

this was in large part due to a fatal misinterpretation of the National Socialist educational goals. 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 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.

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 and controversial interpretation of the development of Swedish education after the Second World War by unifying different strands of research that have never been brought together. While laying out this interpretation, the article also provides support for and elaborates on the conclusions of Horn, for instance by connecting his research to more recent scholarly work done on the role of the German youth in National Socialist society and the relationship between Nazism and “war pedagogy.”

## The Youth Rebellion

Under National Socialism, the school system 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.’”<sup>8</sup> However, the National Socialists’ authoritarian style of educational administration was, in fact, mostly a way of veiling truly radical and subversive policies.

Despite official declarations that the preservation of the German nation strongly depended on well-run 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.”<sup>9</sup>

It consequently did not matter to the National Socialists, or most of them, what happened to Germany’s academic prowess. 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, teachers, and other natural authority figures to the National Socialist movement.<sup>10</sup>

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,<sup>11</sup> and they were given extraordinary privileges that did not extend to

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<sup>8</sup> Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Horn, “The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich,” 426.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Glenn, *Contrasting Models of State and School: A Comparative Historical Study of Parental Choice and State Control* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in History and Memory* (London: Little, Brown, 2015), 104.

most adults in Germany, including “the right to carry daggers, wear uniforms, and issue commands—all of which tended to inflate juvenile egos.”<sup>12</sup> Hence, quite naturally, HJ members developed “a distaste for the schools that kept them in a subordinate capacity and recognized them only as students.”<sup>13</sup>

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. In a book published in 1934, von Schirach had declared that “youth is always right” and that students would only 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.”<sup>14</sup>

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.” 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.<sup>15</sup> Constantly tired, the children were, in effect, primed to engage in delinquencies, and there was no parental pressure to do otherwise.<sup>16</sup>

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 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, such as school and the family, free reign. 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.’”<sup>17</sup>

Only by degrading themselves and adopting the rhetoric of their politicized students could teachers hope to receive any respect and avoid being reprimanded. The National Socialist Teachers’ League (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.’”<sup>18</sup>

Not surprisingly, 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”

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<sup>12</sup> Horn, “The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich,” 427.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 428.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Horn, “The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich,” 431.

<sup>15</sup> Horn, “The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich,” 428–29.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Denis G.G. Lepage, *Hitler Youth, 1922–1945: An Illustrated History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2009), 83.

<sup>17</sup> Horn, “The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich,” 432–33.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

to turn matters around.<sup>19</sup> 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. Consequently, the destructive attacks on schools continued throughout the war.

Academic achievement also 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.'"<sup>20</sup> Reports written by the Security Service of the SS, the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD), showed that German universities were shocked at the incoming students' limited knowledge.<sup>21</sup>

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."<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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."<sup>24</sup>

Thus, while high-ranking Nazis were recruited from an older generation, they depended on youth to carry out the most conspicuous acts of violence necessary to realize their goals. To provide another example, "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."<sup>25</sup>

Against this background, the suggestion that it was an authoritarian and orderly education system that ultimately paved the way for Nazi violence and genocide appears ill-founded. 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 by teaching 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. German youths who, like these and other high-ranking Nazis, were born 1900–1908 experienced not the old educational order, but so-called war pedagogy (*Kriegspädagogik*), which disrupted the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 438.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 438.

<sup>21</sup> Heinz Boberach, ed. *Meldungen aus dem Reich. Auswahl aus den geheimen Lageberichten des Sicherheits-Dienstes der SS 1939–1944* (Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1965).

<sup>22</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives: Generations and Violence Through the German Dictatorships* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 151.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 137–51.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>25</sup> Ian Rich, *Holocaust Perpetrators of the German Police Battalions: The Mass Murder of Jewish Civilians, 1940–1942* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 12.



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.<sup>26</sup>

Despite its militaristic name, war pedagogy was “supposed to be a method of ‘the heart’ that encouraged enthusiasm for the national cause” and encouraged children’s natural aggressive traits.<sup>27</sup> It was predicated on a move from Germany’s authoritative teacher-led methods of instruction toward “active, child-centered methods,”<sup>28</sup> 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.”<sup>29</sup> By so doing, “[t]eachers . . . 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.”<sup>30</sup> There is considerable evidence that these measures worked and that the students deepened their commitment to the war effort.<sup>31</sup>

That war pedagogy hardly was comparable to the methods that had previously dominated the German education system is further evidenced by the fact that “teachers and pedagogical theorists circulated the idea that every academic subject could and should generate enthusiasm for the war mobilization”;<sup>32</sup> and, indeed, “used the war and the perceived universal enthusiasm as a topic in all academic subjects, from writing to physical science.”<sup>33</sup> 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” came to permeate all school subjects, even mathematics and languages.<sup>34</sup>

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,<sup>35</sup> and also why many of them later became key figures in the Third Reich. Thus, 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.

## The Aftermath in Germany

German pedagogues and other scholars in the young Federal Republic recognized that the National Socialist system of schooling was not merely alien but hostile to German

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<sup>26</sup> Andrew Donson, “Why Did German Youths Become Fascists? Nationalist Males Born 1900 to 1908 in War and Revolution,” *Social History* 31, no. 3: 337–58 (2006).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>29</sup> Carolyn Kay, “War Pedagogy in the German Primary School Classroom During the First World War,” *War & Society* 33, no. 1: 6 (2014).

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Donson, *Youth in the Fatherless Land: War Pedagogy, Nationalism, and Authority in Germany, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 60–61.

<sup>31</sup> Kay, “War Pedagogy in the German Primary School Classroom During the First World War.”; Donson, *Youth in the Fatherless Land*.

<sup>32</sup> Donson, “Why Did German Youths Become Fascists?,” 342; emphasis in original.

<sup>33</sup> Donson, *Youth in the Fatherless Land*, 59.

<sup>34</sup> Erika Mann, *School for Barbarians: Education under the Nazis* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2014 [1938]), 55.

<sup>35</sup> Donson, “Why Did German Youths Become Fascists?”

educational tradition.<sup>36</sup> 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.”<sup>37</sup>

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. 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 Johann Friedrich Herbart, who had reacted against what they perceived as the growing materialistic and utilitarian tendencies of their time.<sup>38</sup>

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 ensuring 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.<sup>39</sup> According to Erika Mann, daughter of 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.”<sup>40</sup> Such an education, Herbart had 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.”<sup>41</sup>

This was 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. In the wake of the disorder of National Socialism, these ideas had a renewed appeal in post-war Germany. 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,<sup>42</sup> 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.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> 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.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Östling, *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*, 194.

<sup>38</sup> Bas van Bommel, *Classical Humanism and the Challenge of Modernity: Debates on Classical Education in 19th-Century Germany* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 3–6.

<sup>39</sup> Gabriel Heller-Sahlgren and Nima Sanandaji, *Glädjeparadoxen: historien om skolans uppgång, fall och möjliga upprättelse* (Stockholm: Dialogos, 2019), 37–45.

<sup>40</sup> Mann, *School for Barbarians: Education under the Nazis*, 45.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in 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.

<sup>42</sup> Östling, *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*, 195.

<sup>43</sup> Östling, *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*, 196.

## 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 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.<sup>44</sup> 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, originally developed to enable mass education in conditions of scarce resources. However, once the economy improved in the mid-1860s, the Bell–Lancaster method was officially abandoned in favor of Herbartian pedagogy.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> 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, repetition, and practice, and by matching the sequence of topics to students' maturity and prior knowledge.<sup>47</sup>

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.<sup>48</sup> Instead, a 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.<sup>49</sup>

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 during most of the war itself—there was also broad political consensus around the pedagogical aims and means of the education system. There was 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 the terms set for the 1940 Schools Enquiry and its outputs, as well as other government documents, right up until 1944.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Östling, *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*, 236.

<sup>45</sup> Heller-Sahlgren and Sanandaji, *Glädjeparadoxen*, 31–46.

<sup>46</sup> See recollections by former students 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).

<sup>47</sup> Swedish National Board of Education, *Undervisningsplan för rikets folkskolor den 31 oktober 1919* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1920).

<sup>48</sup> Jonas Qvarsebo, *Skolbarnets fostran. Enhetsskolan, agan och politiken om barnet 1946–1962* (Linköping: Linköpings universitet, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> Inger Andersson, *Läsning och skrivning – en analys av texter för den allmänna läs- och skrivundervisningen 1842–1982* (Umeå: Umeå universitet, 1986), 82.

<sup>50</sup> Heller-Sahlgren and Sanandaji, *Glädjeparadoxen*, 71.



In other words, what was initially known about National Socialist Germany 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 evident.<sup>51</sup> As thoroughly documented by the historian Johan Östling in his research on the political-cultural effects of National Socialism in Sweden,<sup>52</sup> 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, 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.<sup>53</sup> 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 sought to present of its schools, believing that they were strictly disciplined, harshly run by teachers, and a kind of continuation of the old educational order.<sup>54</sup> 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,"<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup>

Another major influence, according to the historian Gunnar Richardson,<sup>57</sup> 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,<sup>58</sup> presented the author's reflections about his own encounters with Germany's educational

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<sup>51</sup> As one historian writes, the Eastern war turned out to be "an enormous humanitarian catastrophe, which confronted neighboring states, such as Sweden, with new moral challenges." Klas Åmark, *Att bo granne med ondskan: Sveriges förhållande till nazismen, Nazityskland och Förintelsen* [Google Books version] (Stockholm: Bonnier, 2016), ch. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Östling, *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*, 116–68.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>54</sup> Gunnar Richardson, *Hitler-Jugend i svensk skol- och ungdomspolitik: beredskapspedagogik och demokratifostran under andra världskriget* (Stockholm: Hjalmarson & Högberg, 2003), chs. 3 and 5.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Östling, *Sweden after Nazism*, 188.

<sup>56</sup> David Katz, *Tysk uppfostran – några synpunkter* (Stockholm: Fredshögskolan, 1944), 18.

<sup>57</sup> Richardson, *Hitler-Jugend i svensk skol- och ungdomspolitik: beredskapspedagogik och demokratifostran under andra världskriget*, 91–93.

<sup>58</sup> George Ziemer, *Fostran för döden: hur en nazist skapas*, trans. Margareta Ångström (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1943), 7.

institutions. Ziemer had 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.”<sup>59</sup> 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.”<sup>60</sup>

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 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 also have been demonstrated to 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.”<sup>61</sup> 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.”<sup>62</sup>

Despite any misgivings we may have about its truthfulness, Ziemer’s book, and others like it,<sup>63</sup> struck a chord in Swedish society and seemed to incriminate the country’s own school system, which emphasized teacher-led instruction and regarded discipline as an educational virtue. The Swedish education system was thus brought into what Östling calls a “Nazi sphere of association,”<sup>64</sup> the reach of which was based more on perception than fact. The 1944 hit movie *Torment*, written by a young Ingmar Bergman, suggested, for example, that Swedish schoolteachers were influenced by the Nazis,<sup>65</sup> when, in fact, teachers were largely immune to Nazi propaganda, and the organizations of teachers in both the elementary *folkskola* and the secondary *läroverk* collectively rejected National Socialism as a creed.<sup>66</sup>

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

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<sup>59</sup> Ziemer, *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* (London: Constable, 1942), 19–20.

<sup>60</sup> Ziemer, *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Per Höjeberg, *Utmaningarna mot demokratins skola: den svenska lärarkåren, nazismen och sovjetkommunismen* (Lund: Lunds universitet, 2016), 81.

<sup>62</sup> Richardson, *Hitler-Jugend i svensk skol- och ungdomspolitik: beredskapspedagogik och demokratiföstran under andra världskriget*, 84.

<sup>63</sup> E.g., Peter Wiener, *Hur ett herrefolk uppfostras*, trans. Alf Ahlberg (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1944).

<sup>64</sup> Östling, *Sweden after Nazism*, 128.

<sup>65</sup> Birgitta Almgren, *Krossade illusioner: fallet Kappner och nazistisk infiltration i Sverige 1933–1945* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 2019), 282.

<sup>66</sup> Höjeberg, *Utmaningarna mot demokratins skola: den svenska lärarkåren, nazismen och sovjetkommunismen*; Almgren, *Krossade illusioner: fallet Kappner och nazistisk infiltration i Sverige 1933–1945*.

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 individualization”—predated the Third Reich.<sup>67</sup> 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, 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.”<sup>68</sup> 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.<sup>69</sup> The latter was an influential thinker in the Social Democratic Party, and an admirer of the American educational philosopher John Dewey,<sup>70</sup> who, in a seminal essay, had presented Herbartianism as “an expression of German authoritarianism.”<sup>71</sup>

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 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.”<sup>72</sup>

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, and to build on the ideas put forward by the 1940 Schools Enquiry, chaired by Gösta Bagge. Significantly, the Bagge commission had, in the short period between the publication of two consecutive reports in 1944 and 1946, quietly shifted its emphasis from Neo-Humanism to critical thinking and individualistic principles of education.<sup>73</sup> The post-war 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:

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<sup>67</sup> 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.

<sup>68</sup> Östling, *Sweden after Nazism*, 190.

<sup>69</sup> Emilia Fogelklou-Norlind, “Kan man fostra till fred,” *Skola och Samhälle*, no. 3–4 (1945); Alva Myrdal, “Kulturell återuppbyggnad,” *Skola och Samhälle*, no. 3–4 (1945).

<sup>70</sup> On the influence of Dewey on Alva and her husband, the economist Gunnar Myrdal, see Walter A. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 105–06.

<sup>71</sup> Johannes Bellmann, “Re-Interpretation in Historiography: John Dewey and the Neo-Humanist Tradition,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 23, no. 5 (2004): 481.

<sup>72</sup> Alexander Sutherland Neill, *The Problem Teacher* (London: Jenkins, 1939), 47.

<sup>73</sup> Östling, *Sweden after Nazism*, 181–83.

“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.”<sup>74</sup>

The Schools Commission also harshly denounced prevailing pedagogical methods, calling the practice of teacher-led instruction “authoritarian to its core,”<sup>75</sup> and criticized the existing educational content. Traditional humanistic subjects, for instance, were said to concern themselves with “dead matter that lacked significance both to an understanding of cultural development at large and to a better understanding of the problems of our own age.”<sup>76</sup>

As Östling notes, the report represented a complete turnaround from Neo-Humanism.<sup>77</sup> 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.”<sup>78</sup> It also called for a curriculum that was grounded in students’ everyday experiences.

What had produced such a sea-change in education policy was, as discussed, 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.”<sup>79</sup>

The 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.”<sup>80</sup> 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.<sup>81</sup> All terms associated with traditional

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>75</sup> SOU 1948:27, *1946 års skolkommissons betänkande med förslag till riktlinjer för det svenska skolväsendets utveckling* (Stockholm: Ecklesiastikdepartementet), 5.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>78</sup> SOU 1948:27, *1946 års skolkommissons betänkande med förslag till riktlinjer för det svenska skolväsendets utveckling*, 5.

<sup>79</sup> Tage Erlander, *1940–1949* (Stockholm: Tidens förlag, 1973), 237.

<sup>80</sup> Swedish National Board of Education, *Läroplan för grundskolan* (Stockholm: Skolöverstyrelsen, 1962), 13.

<sup>81</sup> *Läroplan för grundskolan: Lgr 69* (Stockholm: Utbildningsförlaget, 1969).

knowledge-based schooling, such as “culture” and “education,” had, consequently, been removed from the curriculum by the Ministry of Education.<sup>82</sup>

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.<sup>83</sup> 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.<sup>84</sup> The term “discipline” itself had in the late 1960s been denounced by Education Minister (later Prime Minister) Olof Palme as associated with the “ideals of an authoritarian society.”<sup>85</sup> 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.<sup>86</sup>

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.”<sup>87</sup> 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.<sup>88</sup>

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”).<sup>89</sup> 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. The 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

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<sup>82</sup> Karin Hadenius, *Jämlikhet och frihet: politiska mål för den svenska grundskolan* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1990), 228.

<sup>83</sup> Johan Wennström, *Lärare utan frihet: när vänstern och högern kidnappade lärarprofessionen* (Stockholm: Samhällsförlaget, 2014), 48.

<sup>84</sup> Richardson, *Hitler-Jugend i svensk skol- och ungdomspolitik: beredskapspedagogik och demokratifostran under andra världskriget*, 214.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Richardson, *Hitler-Jugend i svensk skol- och ungdomspolitik: beredskapspedagogik och demokratifostran under andra världskriget*, 224.

<sup>86</sup> Heller-Sahlgren and Sanandaji, *Glädjeparadoxen*, 81–82.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Bo Rothstein, *Den socialdemokratiska staten: reformer och förvaltning inom svensk arbetsmarknads- och skolpolitik* (Lund: Arkiv förlag, 2010 [1986]), 114.

<sup>88</sup> Gunnar Ohlander, *Kunskap i skolan* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1981), 126.

<sup>89</sup> Horn, “The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich,” 431.



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.<sup>90</sup>

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.”<sup>91</sup> Children subjected to this kind of pedagogy 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.

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 in practice is more or less entirely transferred to students themselves.<sup>92</sup> 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.”<sup>93</sup> 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.<sup>94</sup> 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.<sup>95</sup>

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,<sup>96</sup> while “student influence” for the first time was enshrined in law.<sup>97</sup> 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 democratically,” and that teachers should use “democratic methods” rather than rely on more traditional, “authoritarian instruction.”<sup>98</sup> “Practically all regulations, institutions, incentives, and values now pointed in the direction of student-centered education and student influence,”<sup>99</sup> and

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<sup>90</sup> Glenn, *Contrasting Models of State and School: A Comparative Historical Study of Parental Choice and State Control*, 158.

<sup>91</sup> Donson, “Why Did German Youths Become Fascists?,” 342.

<sup>92</sup> Donald Broady, “Trettio år efteråt – ett återbesök hos den dolda läroplanen,” *Kritisk utbildningstidskrift (KRUT)*, no. 127 (2007), 11–12.

<sup>93</sup> SOU 1948:27, *1946 års skolkommissons betänkande med förslag till riktlinjer för det svenska skolväsendets utveckling*, 3.

<sup>94</sup> Ohrlander, *Kunskap i skolan*, 122–23.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>96</sup> Jonas Linderöth, *Lärarens återkomst: från förvirring till upprättelse* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 2016), ch. 4.

<sup>97</sup> Government Bill 1990/91:115, *Om vissa skollagsfrågor m m.* (Stockholm: Swedish Parliament).

<sup>98</sup> Government Bill 1990/91:115, *Om vissa skollagsfrågor m m.*, 53.

<sup>99</sup> Heller-Sahlgren and Sanandaji, *Glädjeparadoxen*, 86.

were embraced not only by the Social Democrats, but also by the center-right parties, including the liberal-conservative Moderate Party.<sup>100</sup> 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.<sup>101</sup>

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.<sup>102</sup> 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.”<sup>103</sup> 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.<sup>104</sup>

Thus, in the 1990s and first decades of the 2000s, the individualistic and purported anti-Nazi ideals of the 1946 Schools Commission were 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.<sup>105</sup> 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.<sup>106</sup> (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.<sup>107</sup> 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,

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<sup>100</sup> Johan Wennström, “Marketized Education: How Regulatory Failure Undermined the Swedish School System,” *Journal of Education Policy* 35, no. 5 (2019).

<sup>101</sup> Carlgren et al., “Changes in Nordic Teaching Practices: From Individualised Teaching to the Teaching of Individuals.”

<sup>102</sup> Swedish National Agency for Education, *Nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan 2003 – sammanfattande huvudrapport* (Stockholm: Skolverket, 2004).

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>104</sup> Heller-Sahlgren and Sanandaji, *Glädjeparadoxen*, 93.

<sup>105</sup> Maria Jelmini, “Lärare utsätts för hot och våld,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, 31 January 2014.

<sup>106</sup> Karin Thurffjell, “Mer kvarsittning i friskolor: ‘Ska inte syssla med straff,’” *Svenska Dagbladet*, 14 April 2017.

<sup>107</sup> 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>.

and in diagnostic tests for new university students.<sup>108</sup> In addition, teaching became an increasingly unattractive profession, particularly for high-achieving students and children of teachers.<sup>109</sup> 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.

## Conclusion

Few settings evoke imagery of discipline and obedience in popular imagination as the National Socialist schooling system, with supposedly goose-stepping children blindly 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 was viewed for a long time 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 classrooms, instigated by the HJ and tacitly sanctioned by Hitler himself, led to a radical decline in student achievement and acute teacher shortages. 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.

Senior Nazis, too, received an education that was vastly different from the Neo-Humanist principles of the old educational order. Indeed, youths born 1900–1908, including several key figures in the National Socialist 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 included a move toward child-centered methods, which helped to generate a greater zeal of war among students.

Thus, 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.

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<sup>108</sup> Magnus Henrekson and Sebastian Jävervall, *Educational Performance in Swedish Schools Is Plummeting—What Are the Facts?* (Stockholm: Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences, 2017).

<sup>109</sup> Emil Bertilsson, *Skollärare – rekrytering till utbildning och yrke 1977–2009* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2014).

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 child-centered methods reminiscent of those 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 entirely 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 socioeconomic and cultural explanations for Sweden's march toward progressivism.<sup>110</sup> Given the fact that the reforms were influenced by ideas from psychology, the technocratic tradition within Swedish policymaking, which historically has relied heavily on the advice of social scientists,<sup>111</sup> 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 they were a key factor instrumental in precipitating the hasty policy U-turn from the educational principles on which the Swedish school system had been based until that point.

We cannot, of course, entirely exclude the possibility that the references to Nazism in the post-war education debate were *solely* rhetorical exaggerations, designed to silence opposition to educational reform. However, we find such an interpretation highly unlikely given the complete cultural break with Germany that demonstrably occurred in Sweden during the closing stages of the Second World War; the sudden retreat of the 1940 Schools Enquiry from Neo-Humanism; the words from the first chair of the 1946 Schools Commission, Tage Erlander, about the educational lessons learned from the experience of Nazi rule; and the many other pieces of evidence discussed throughout this article. They all suggest that the fear of Nazism among post-war reformers was genuine and decisive in the decision to abandon the old Swedish school system.

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<sup>110</sup> Heller-Sahlgren and Sanandaji, *Glädjeparadoxen*.

<sup>111</sup> Andreas Bergh and Gissur Erlingsson, "Liberalization without Retrenchment: Understanding the Consensus on Swedish Welfare State Reforms," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 32, no. 1 (2009): 71–93.