



Introduction

During the tumultuous period considered here, spanning the Wilhelmine, Weimar, and Nazi years, most German children between the ages of six and fourteen attended a public elementary school or *Volksschule*. Lessons taught in these schools are the subject of this book. Moral and national education were stated priorities for schools in all three periods, and the focus here is on the values, attachments, and loyalties promoted by the textbooks and curricula used in these schools, and on continuities and changes, both over time and across regional and religious divides. The three sections of the book consider schooling in Wilhelmine, Weimar, and Nazi Germany; and within each section, chapters address five thematic areas: religion, community, place, leaders, and war. Schools of all three periods offered lessons that encouraged attachments to God and church, family and community, region and fatherland, and symbols of the nation. This study considers how the content and function of these lessons changed, and how they remained the same, as the German Empire gave way to the Weimar Republic and, especially, as the Third Reich supplanted the Republic. The content of schooling incorporated altered social, political, and military priorities, but much stayed the same or changed slowly. The continuities in German schooling represent a cultural *continuo* over which Germany's political and economic drama unfolded, not a distinctive German educational path that inexorably led to National Socialism. Examination of lessons from the Nazi period shows how materials with specifically Nazi themes were interspersed with older stories and poems and served to embed National Socialism in traditions, often imagined, of German virtue and greatness.

Schools for the People: Why Elementary Schools?

Germany's public elementary schools are of interest because these *Volksschulen*, or people's schools, provided most German children with their only full-time education. By the end of the nineteenth century, German elementary schools were well-developed, well-attended, and thoroughly institutionalized. School attendance and literacy were almost universal and teacher training was be-

German Elementary Education from 1890 to 1945

Lessons about Religion, Home, and Fatherland

Katharine Kennedy

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coming more sophisticated. Reform pedagogy, which sought to engage children and make learning more child-centered, increasingly influenced curricula, textbooks, and teaching methods. Throughout the decades considered here, schooling was mandatory, in most regions for eight critical years of a child's development, from age six to fourteen. Around 90 percent of these pupils attended a public *Volksschule*. In the 1891–92 school year, almost eight million children attended 56,563 public elementary schools, distributed throughout Wilhelmine Germany. Enrollment rose to over ten million by 1911, but declined with the loss of population after World War I. Enrollment in 1931–32 was around 7.6 million but rose in 1940, after Nazi annexations, to 8.2 million.¹

Because elementary education developed under the auspices of the individual German states, a study of these schools offers insight into tensions between national and regional authority and the trend, over time, toward centralization. The constitution of Imperial Germany made no mention of education, and there was no national ministry of education. This left responsibility for schools to the states' ministries. The Weimar Constitution addressed education, but the absence of needed legislation prevented adoption of envisioned national policies and left most authority over schooling in the hands of the states. Centralization increased considerably under the Nazi regime, which created a national education ministry and weakened the role of the states. Regional differences in curriculum and textbooks were present in all three periods and are a focus of this study.

Elementary schools of Wilhelmine, Weimar, and Nazi Germany focused on morality, behavioral norms, loyalty, religion, patriotism, and sentiment, as well as practical skills needed for everyday life. The stated goals and curricula of elementary schools differed from those of elite secondary or higher schools, which were more likely to emphasize cultivation of the intellect and lessons about Germany as a “land of poets and thinkers.”² A small minority of German children attended these schools, sometimes entering them in the first grade, but often after completion of the third or fourth grade. While recognizing the importance of secondary and university education, it is essential to identify the cultural building blocks provided by the elementary schools and the limits of the education offered there. Each chronological section of the book begins with a short chapter devoted to the role of class, religion, place, and gender in the administration, decision-making, and instruction in *Volksschulen*.

Five Themes: Lessons about Religion, Community, Place, Fatherland, and War

Textbooks, along with official curricula, sample lesson plans, and documents governing educational policy, are sources for this study. Emphasis is placed on textbooks that were officially adopted and widely assigned, and the discussion

generally notes when, where, and by whom textbooks were used. By the turn of the twentieth century, individual teachers were widely encouraged to shape the tenor and emphases of lessons and to employ pedagogy that made lessons interesting to their pupils. Even though instruction varied among schools and teachers, required teaching materials offer insight into officially prescribed norms and intertwined aspects of identity formation. The textbooks adopted for use in *Volksschulen* included primers for the youngest pupils, Bible storybooks, catechisms, arithmetic books, atlases, and songbooks, and as well as less universally assigned textbooks for history and geography. The most important and ubiquitous school books, however, were reading books or *Lesebücher*, which were anthologies assigned to support instruction in a range of disciplines, from reading to geography to history.³ These volumes were among the most widely read books in Germany. Reading books appeared in different volumes for children of different ages, with most of the texts about geography and history found in the volumes for older children in the sixth through eighth grades. Reading books changed over time, and varied by region, but they also featured recurring, canonical poems and stories. Focused neither on providing information nor on introducing major works of German literature, Wilhelmine reading books typically included units about children's relationships with God, with their communities, with German places, and with the past.⁴ These topics are the basis for the themes that structure of this book and provide evidence of schools' lessons about loyalties, identities, and virtues.

Religion

Scholarship about German schooling has sometimes treated religious education in isolation from the rest of the curriculum, but religion classes were a regular part of children's education and were widely described as a site for teaching loyalty to church, love of God, and moral behavior.⁵ The three chapters of this study that are devoted to religious education explore the changing but persistent role of religion in Wilhelmine, Weimar, and Nazi schools, the controversies surrounding religious education, and the intended role of religious instruction in teaching "German virtues." All three chapters consider ways that Christian education encouraged support for church and nation, and the Weimar and Nazi-era chapters discuss efforts to Germanize Christianity. The Protestant and Catholic churches exerted considerable influence over the curricula and administration of Wilhelmine public elementary schools, but the churches' authority diminished in the Weimar and especially the Nazi period. Nonetheless, most pupils in the Republic and the Third Reich continued to receive religious instruction at school. Christianity and National Socialism coexisted in schools that taught children to be both Nazis and Christians.

Until the late 1930s, most public elementary schools were designated as either Catholic or Protestant schools, which made it possible for confession-

ally specific religious themes to permeate the school day. Confessional reading books were the norm in most parts of Wilhelmine Germany, remained common during the Weimar years, and were eliminated in the Nazi period. Comparison of Protestant and Catholic textbooks and curricula, and the education of the small Jewish minority, are recurring emphases in this study.

Community

Reading books typically included units of stories that encouraged attachment to familiar communities, from the family to the neighborhood and workplace. Intended especially for younger children, such stories featured German families, German mothers, and German farmers, although often nothing was distinctively German about these rather ordinary stories, which resembled texts that appeared in schoolbooks used in other countries.⁶ Appealing more to the heart than the mind, these texts sought to inculcate a sense of belonging and obligation, usually to an idealized, homogeneous community. Often these texts provide examples of hierarchy and authority and of obligations toward other people. Either tacitly or overtly, texts about community, in Wilhelmine, Weimar, and Nazi textbooks, excluded people of different ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds. Nazi reading books republished many older, familiar stories, but interspersed newer texts about race and heredity. The three chapters about community demonstrate continuities in conventional lessons about qualities such as obedience, loyalty, diligence, and courtesy, but the chapter about Nazi Germany describes a shift toward explicit messages about a national, racially defined community or *Volksgemeinschaft*.

Informing the discussion of inclusion, exclusion, and empathy in the chapters about community and religion is a body of scholarship about Nazi notions of morality and their paradoxes. Employing various approaches and sources, from court and police records to diaries of Nazi experts, this scholarship shows how German leaders and soldiers rejected universal moral obligation in favor of their own race, community, or comrades.⁷ Claudia Koonz, in *The Nazi Conscience*, argues that, by limiting moral obligation to a racially defined circle and moderating some of their most radical rhetoric, the Nazis “appropriated the Golden Rule” and enabled Germans self-righteously to accept National Socialism and the dehumanization of others.⁸ Further study of teaching materials from before and during the Nazi period provides additional insight into how lessons narrowed the circle of people worthy of kindness and empathy, while claiming to subscribe to a religion that taught love of one’s neighbor.

Place

Lessons about attachment to place, found in geography instruction and across the curriculum, encompassed regional, national, and global topics, but these

three levels of geographical identification conditioned each other and employed common themes. The Wilhelmine, Weimar, and Nazi chapters about place consider how, as Germany acquired and lost territory and empire, schools addressed the question “Where is Germany?” After Germany’s defeat in World War I, schools taught children to imagine a larger Germany and to identify with diasporic German populations in Europe and beyond. Weimar-era messages claiming German entitlement to eastern lands persisted in Nazi textbooks and were used to justify military aggression. Although German children received little instruction about the world beyond Germany, schools insisted on Germany’s right to overseas colonies, long after losing them.⁹

A noteworthy thread in lessons about place was *Heimat*, the warm, cozy German notion of home, in its various forms. From poems about the place where one’s cradle stood to stories about transplantation of the German home to African colonies, texts often cast loyalties to place in intimate, familiar terms. In both the Wilhelmine and Weimar periods, reading books specific to individual states or provinces celebrated regional landscapes, landmarks, folklore, and dialects, providing evidence that schools encouraged provincialized national identities. Consistent with other scholarship about *Heimat*, the study of schoolbooks offers insight into how focus on familiar spaces harmonized with the national project, rather than undermining it.¹⁰ Although Nazi schools acknowledged regional traditions by publishing regional editions of reading books, lessons about place and space became increasingly uniform, nationalized, and militarized in Nazi schools.

German Leaders and National Symbols

Lessons promoting loyalty to Germany’s leaders and national symbols were among the most direct and the most changeable aspects of instruction about being German. Some patriotic poems and songs provided continuity, even as Germany’s national holidays, flags, and leaders changed between 1890 and 1945. Schools moved rapidly, both in 1919 and in 1933, to reflect changes in the leaders who represented the nation. The chapter about Wilhelmine leaders and symbols presents not only the reigning emperor but also princes from the various German states as kindly, devoted fathers to their subjects. The chapter about the Weimar period shows that most new editions of reading books quickly removed stories about royalty, but that symbols of the Republic and its leaders remained largely absent from teaching materials. The chapter about the Nazi period focuses on depictions of Hitler and a children’s version of the cult of the leader. Schools have long been seen as playing a vital role in forming nations,¹¹ and the shifting contents of German schoolbooks and history curricula provide examples of the uses of leaders, ceremonies, monuments, songs, and flags to shape national education and encourage national loyalties.

War

The wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which contributed to creating and defining the Kaiserreich, the Weimar Republic, and the Nazi dictatorship, were present in reading books, songbooks, and history curricula. In addition, military-style drills and activities were components of boys' physical education, with Weimar-era initiatives reducing these aspects and Nazi programs expanding them. Mourning was an especially prominent theme in Weimar-era texts, which emphasized shared memory of wartime loss and suffering. Nazi texts conveyed intensified anger over the postwar treaty, repeated untruthful narratives about the origins and outcomes of the war, and celebrated heroic martyrdom, both for the Nazi movement and for the nation. Sacrificial death of soldiers, as a manifestation of the ultimate devotion to God, community, home, and fatherland, is among the persistent threads in canonical stories found in reading books of the Wilhelmine, Weimar, and Nazi periods. War-time sacrifice emerges in these textbooks as a defining feature of Germanness, with nationalized death overcoming social fissures.¹²

Change and Continuity: Wilhelmine, Weimar, and Nazi Schooling

In fifteen years, Germany went from monarchy to republic to fascist dictatorship, but curricula and textbooks used in elementary schools changed slowly. Developing teaching materials generally required official approvals, and publication and distribution of new books for millions of pupils of different ages was expensive. Understanding when and how textbooks and curricula changed, especially after the Nazis came to power, provides insight into the possibilities for and limits to the instrumentalization of mass schooling in the early twentieth century. Little modern scholarship on the history of German schooling encompasses the entire period from 1890 to 1945,¹³ although textbooks and curricula are readily compared and serve as sources for examining both continuities and transformations in the mental furnishings that public schools offered the nation's young citizens.

Studies of continuities in modern German history have long been influenced by debates about whether Germany followed a special path that led to National Socialism.¹⁴ This book shows that, although there was considerable continuity in German schooling, there was no distinctly German educational path to the Third Reich. Many of the same texts, from fairy tales to nature poems to patriotic ballads, persisted in reading books that were published in the Wilhelmine, Weimar, and Nazi periods, and these stories often resembled those read by pupils in other countries. Critics during the Weimar years complained that many older texts were contrary to republicanism and democracy, and zealous Nazis, in the 1930s, complained that such texts failed to promote National

Socialism. This study asks which stories persisted across political divides and why. Weimar-era reading books added very few texts that represented or promoted the Republic or republicanism, whereas Nazi textbooks incorporated, among older stories, texts that explicitly reflected Nazi ideology and endorsed the Nazi movement. Texts that advocated German territorial expansion, militarism, racial supremacy, and antisemitism were present in reading books by the early 1940s but had played only a limited role in Wilhelmine textbooks. Comparison of lessons taught across German political divides requires attention to topics that were absent as well as those that were present.

A study of the content of elementary schooling in Germany, between 1890 and 1945, cannot explain why people became Nazis, even though most of the Germans who supported the Third Reich, as well as those who did not, attended these schools. It is, however, evident that the religious, moral, and political education offered in schools in all three periods failed to build solid guardrails against the appeal of National Socialism. Recognition not only of texts and lessons that obviously conveyed the dominant ideological and political currents of their day, but also of more ordinary stories, offers insight into the interface between Nazi radicalism and German tradition, the resilience of canonical texts, and educators' understanding of age appropriateness.¹⁵ Nazi reading books incorporated reassuring, familiar, older texts, in addition to newer stories that articulated the racism and violence of National Socialism but also presented it as a virtuous movement.

Scholars have described Nazi murderers as ordinary men and ordinary women, or as "entirely normal." Psychologist James Waller writes that "the most outstanding common characteristic of perpetrators is their normality, not their abnormality," and Harald Welzer refers to the "entirely normal" psychological profile of most Nazi perpetrators.¹⁶ Many, including the middle-aged men of the well-studied Reserve Police Battalion 101, completed elementary school before 1933.¹⁷ Ordinary Germans, while attending elementary school both before and during the Nazi period, read hundreds of ordinary stories and poems, about landscapes, families, work, and historical figures. The continued presence of these texts in schoolbooks, and of other persistent lessons about religion, homeland, and fatherland, helped to convey an appearance that National Socialism was normal and that Nazis were virtuous. Textbooks served as one of many sites used to present National Socialism as consistent with traditional values.¹⁸ They also exemplify the incomplete Nazification of schooling. Lessons offered in Wilhelmine and Weimar schools did not cause National Socialism, but Nazi schools used older lessons to validate Nazism. As sites of many intersections, of ideology and institutions, of church and state, of youth and adulthood, and of public and private spheres, schools are a complex site for studying the mental furnishings designed for children in Germany's late nineteenth-century monarchy, its early twentieth-century republic, and its Nazi dictatorship.

Notes

1. Gizycki et al., *Volksschulwesen*, 9; *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich*, 34 (1913): 300; 51(1932): 421; 59(1941–42): 632.
2. See Albisetti, *Schooling German Girls*; Albisetti, *Secondary School Reform*; Kleinau, *Bildung*.
3. See Lässig and Kopisch, “Textbooks and Beyond,” 1–16; Heinze, “Historical Textbook Research,” 122–28; Caruso, “Biopolitik,” 292–96; Caruso, *Biopolitik im Klassenzimmer*, 290–95.
4. See, e.g., Möhlenbrink and Röhr, *Schleswig-Holsteinischer Jugendfreund*, Holstein, iii–x; *Lesebuch evangelisch Oberstufe*, Arnsberg, iii–ix; *Hannoversches Lesebuch*, v–xi; *Deutsches Lesebuch*, Wiesbaden, Part 3, iii–x.
5. On religious education, see Helmreich, *Religious Education*; Ohlemacher, *Religionspädagogik*; Lachmann and Schröder, *Geschichte*; Nipkow and Schweitzer, *Religionspädagogik*; Roggenkamp and Wermke, *Religiöse Sozialisation*.
6. See, e.g., Bruno, *Francinet*; *Lesebuch des Kantons Bern: Viertes Schuljahr*; McGuffey’s *Fourth Eclectic Reader*.
7. See, e.g., Chapoutot, *Law of Blood*, 15, 19–20, 414–15; Gross, *Anständig*; Kühne, *Belonging*, 32–54, 167–71; Kühne, *Rise and Fall*, 10, 88–96, 292–93; Koonz, *Nazi Conscience*; Reiter, *Nationalsozialismus*; Wildt, *Hitler’s Volksgemeinschaft*, 35–38, 267–72, 280.
8. Koonz, *Nazi Conscience*, 5–6, 146.
9. Naranch and Eley, *German Colonialism*; Szejnmann and Umbach, *Heimat*; Friedrichsmeyer, Lennox, and Zantop, *Imperialist Imagination*; Lässig and Weiss, *World of Children*.
10. See Umbach, *German Federalism*; Applegate, *Nation*; Confino, *Nation*; Green, *Fatherlands*.
11. Gellner, *Thought*, 160–63, 173; Hobsbawm, “Mass-Producing Traditions,” 263–64; Eley and Suny, “Introduction: From the Moment,” 8–9.
12. Behrenbeck, *Der Kult*; Eghigian, *Sacrifice*; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Baird, *To Die*.
13. For exceptions, see Allen, *Transatlantic Kindergarten*; Kleinau, *Bildung*; Herrlitz et al., *Deutsche Schulgeschichte*; Lundgreen, *Sozialgeschichte*.
14. See “Long Nineteenth Century,” 75–82; Eley, *Nazism as Fascism*, 200–9; Smith, “When the Sonderweg Debate,” 21–33.
15. See Heinze, *Schulbuch*, 146, 154–55; Heinze, “Discursive Construction,” 173–77.
16. Waller, “Ordinariness,” 148–62, (quote 148); Welzer, *Täter*, 37, 57, 63; Welzer, “On Killing,” 168–69; Lower, *Hitler’s Furies*, 3, 52–55, 62–69; Koonz, *Mothers*, 419.
17. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 47–48, 71–77, 175, 182–86; Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, 205–11.
18. See Evans, *Coming*, 448.