



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 7. Nazi Germany, 1933-1945
Guidelines for Teaching History (1938)

The education of children and young people in the National Socialist spirit meant that school curricula had to conform to the ideological foundations of the Nazi regime. Initially, this necessitated the “coordination” [*Gleichschaltung*] of teachers – a process that was achieved in part through the dismissal of teachers regarded as politically or racially unreliable. For the most part, however, “coordination” resulted from the teachers’ own eagerness to conform. Thus, teachers were represented at above average rates in the party and the party leadership even before the moratorium on new memberships was lifted in 1937. The party’s National Socialist Teachers’ Association [*Nationalsozialistischer Lehrerbund* or NSLB] played an important role in providing political guidance for teachers by organizing mandatory continuing education courses and events that conveyed the desired ideological content of school curricula. The following guidelines for teaching history (1938) illustrate both the eclectic character of the National Socialist conception of history and its racial-ideological fundament.

The German nation in its essence and greatness, in its fateful struggle for internal and external identity is the subject of the teaching of history. It is based on the natural bond of the child with his nation and, by interpreting history as the fateful struggle for existence between the nations, has the particular task of educating young people to respect the great German past and to have faith in the mission and future of their own nation and to respect the right of existence of other nations. The teaching of history must bring the past alive for the young German in such a way that it enables him to understand the present, makes him feel the responsibility of every individual for the nation as a whole and gives him encouragement for his own political activity. It will thereby awaken in the younger generation that sense of responsibility towards ancestors and grandchildren which will enable it to let its life be subsumed in eternal Germany.

[. . .]

A new understanding of the German past has emerged from the faith of the National Socialist movement in the future of the German people. The teaching of history must come from this vital faith, it must fill young people with the awareness that they belong to a nation which of all the European nations had the longest and most difficult path to its unification but now, at the beginning of a new epoch, can look forward to what is coming full of confidence. [. . .]

The certainty of a great national existence [. . .] is for us based [. . .] at the same time on the clear recognition of the basic racial forces of the German nation which are always active and

indestructibly enduring. Insight into the permanence of the hereditary characteristics and the merely contingent significance of environment facilitates a new and deep understanding of historical personalities and contexts.

[. . .]

The course of history must not appear to our young people as a chronicle which strings events together indiscriminately, but, as in a play, only the important events, those which have a major impact on life, should be portrayed in history lessons. It is not only the successful figures who are important and have an impact on life, but also the tragic figures and periods, not only the victories, but also the defeats. But it must always show greatness because in greatness, even when it intimidates, the eternal law is visible. Only a sentient grasp of great deeds is the precondition for an understanding of historical contexts; the powerless and insignificant have no history.

Source of English translation: Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism, 1919-1945*, Vol. 2: *State, Economy and Society, 1933-1939*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000, p. 244.

Source of original German text: Reichsministerium für Wissenschaft, Erziehung, und Volksbildung. *Erziehung und Unterricht in der Höheren Schule*. Amtliche Ausgabe des Reichs- und Preußischen Ministeriums für Wissenschaft, Erziehung, und Volksbildung. Weidmann: Berlin, 1938, pp. 69-70; reprinted in Kurt Ingo Flessau, *Schule der Diktatur. Lehrpläne und Schulbücher im Nationalsozialismus*. Frankfurt am Main: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1982, pp. 77-79, p. 186, n. 49.