

Reforms after the catastrophe?

Ambivalence, continuities and discontinuities in Westphalia's "institutions for the blind and deafmute" between 1933 and 1965

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When the Nazis seized power in Germany in 1933, discrimination against deaf people increased significantly. They were listed as a target group in the "Law to prevent genetically unhealthy offspring" and thus, from January 1934, became victims of coercive eugenic measures. The law also applied to the students at the "school for deafmutes" in the Westphalia province. Their "genetic health" was noted, and many were sterilized against their will.

Looking at the staff files of teachers from Westphalia schools as well as at other sources, I examine the many continuities and few discontinuities in deaf education in the early Federal Republic of Germany. The files show clearly that many teachers had been involved in Nazi crimes, even though their personal motives are not always clear. Teachers and headmaster contributed in various ways to eugenic measures and to spreading National Socialist ideology on all levels of school life. Many were active in the Nazi party NSDAP, embraced "eugenic" measures, founded and lead school sections of the Hitler Youth organization and the League of German Girls, were members of the National Socialist Storm Division (SA) or its Protection Squadron (SS), and had joined pedagogic or school associations of the National Socialists. Their motivations were complex: Some were Nazi believers who dedicated their lives to the Nazi movement; others were hoping to further their careers and to benefit from the new rulers; a few were mere "observers" who retreated into supposedly neutral, apolitical positions.

After the war ended in 1945 and during the early federal republic, headmasters and teachers denied their involvement in the Nazi system. Until 1947, the British occupying forces pursued a policy of de-Nazification. During this time, many teachers were suspended or dismissed because of their political past. In particular, the British administration suspended those teachers who had been involved in Nazi youth work at schools.

In 1947, German authorities took over de-Nazification from the British occupying forces. A few months later, almost all teachers had been reinstated. German de-Nazification commissions classed almost all teachers as category IV (minor involvement) and V (exonerated). Commission members did not question the explanations the teachers gave themselves for their behavior during Nazism, and credited colleagues and acquaintances that gave testimonials — for the time being, (self) de-Nazification was complete. The teachers' Nazi past was shrouded in silence. Public consideration or commemoration remained elusive.

The same was true for the headmasters of Westphalia's institutions for the "deafmute." Their biographies, too, were cleaned from Nazi "ballast." Thus, only a few months after the war ended, the schools once more were headed by former Nazi teachers who not only influenced the fate of their students, but also, via their national associations, determined the direction of deaf education into the 1960s.