

Hitlers Bildungsreformer: Das Reichsministerium für Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung 1934-1945

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Reviewer: Helen Roche

What's in a name? Often, particularly with books marketed at a more popular audience, all too much seems to be at stake – the controversy caused by Paul Preston's *The Spanish Holocaust* being a recent case in point. (1) Thus far, criticism of Anne C. Nagel's 2012 volume, *Hitlers Bildungsreformer*, has followed similar lines, with a recent review in [H-Soz-u-Kult](#) [2] condemning its title – as well as some of its content – for imparting a far too positive note to the machinations of the Third Reich's Education Ministry, while failing to dwell at sufficient length on the ultimately criminal nature of its endeavours, which were thoroughly implicated in the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*'s mechanisms of exclusion and destruction. The title is castigated explicitly for its 'provocative' linking of Reich Education Minister Bernhard Rust and his henchmen with the reformers of the Weimar Republic or the later Federal Republic of Germany – and implicitly, one might argue, for suggesting an affinity with irreproachable pioneers of educational reform such as Pestalozzi or Wilhelm von Humboldt. Moreover, the fact that Nagel dares to highlight continuities between the Third Reich's *Reichsministerium für Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung*, and its previous manifestations in Prussia and the Weimar Republic, is also treated as an unconscionable piece of whitewashing. (2)

However, are such criticisms really justified? The answer necessarily involves a deeper value judgement on a more abstract level – should we actively shun shades of grey in our exploration of the organs of National Socialist power, or, in seeking them out, do we automatically risk condoning the actions of the organisations under consideration? I suspect that responses to this question are still often constructed somewhat differently in Anglo-American and German historiography, and that the *H-Soz-u-Kult* reviewer's reaction was more instinctive – or heedlessly politically correct – than well-considered. For, at least in this reviewer's opinion, *Hitlers Bildungsreformer* is an informative and very readable piece of scholarship which (rightly) tries to break loose from such conventions, exploring the actions of the Reich Education Ministry and its acolytes on their own terms. After all, do we really need a disclaimer on every page (or a slave whispering in our ear), warning us that 'you must remember that these people were *Nazis*, and *Nazis* are *evil*'? Nagel's readers are presumably historically engaged enough to be able to draw those particular conclusions for themselves.

So, controversy aside, what of the book itself? Nagel admits that the catalyst for her interest in the topic came from a personal encounter with a seemingly (fairly) innocuous elderly gentleman who shared her

family's block of flats. Said gentleman claimed that he had always been thick as thieves with the most exalted Nazi bigwigs – a claim which Nagel and her family always assumed to be false. Yet, years later (and here, the tale seems almost reminiscent of that behind Mary Fulbrook's *A Small Town near Auschwitz* – though far less personal and harrowing), when helping his widow clear out his office after his death, Nagel discovered that all his boasts had been based in fact: he had been a highly-placed – and thoroughly odious – functionary in the *Parteiamtliche Prüfungskommission*, a Party censorship body which had always been at daggers drawn with the Reich Education Ministry. Once she began researching the Ministry's policies and politics, Nagel found herself tracing these connections further, discovering how thoroughly her erstwhile neighbour had been embroiled in the Third Reich's educational history – in this sense, *Hitlers Bildungsreformer* was 'inspired' by her personal encounter with a bit-player from the Nazi past (p. 8).

In general terms, this work is more than a mere institutional history; it also provides an exhaustive case study of two of the centrifugal forces which constantly bedevilled the National Socialist regime's capacity to govern throughout the Third Reich. Firstly, we are given a superb overview of the intricate web of *Kompetenzstreiten* in which the Ministry was enmeshed – that is, the utter inability of competing ministries, government institutions, Party organisations, and especially their leaders, to agree on fixed demarcation lines between their respective competencies. Goebbels, whose unrivalled greed for dominion over all cultural matters (including education) quickly revealed itself in a childish yet deadly desire to thwart Rust at every turn, is demonstrably the worst offender, but lesser functionaries such as Alfred Rosenberg, Rudolf Hess, and their acolytes also had a role to play, as Nagel's elegant disentangling of the multiple (poisoned) threads of extra-ministerial politics makes very clear. From this perspective, it is a wonder that Rust ever managed to hold onto the reins of power in the Ministry at all, let alone remaining in post until the bitter end in 1945 – this chimes with Nagel's broader revisionist argument that the Minister was not as weak or ineffectual a political figure as has often been claimed (pp. 16–20).

Secondly, we are presented with the incessant struggle between the National Socialist regime's desire for state centralisation, and the powerful regionalism present in the semi-autonomous federal system of the German *Länder*, which found a novel (though perhaps not entirely unexpected) support in the form of Hitler's new breed of power-hungry Party satraps, the *Gauleiter*.⁽³⁾ While Rust and his aides saw the merging of the Prussian Culture Ministry and the Reich Education Ministry which followed the Nazi takeover as presenting the perfect opportunity to streamline and unify educational policy throughout the Reich, in accordance with Hitler's ideal of the National Socialist '*Einheitsstaat*' (unified state), those with a stake in regional government sought to stymie their every move, in this as in other areas of political reform where centralisation was seen by Berlin as being both desirable and necessary. Ultimately, despite the Party's initial investment in the idea, Hitler felt unable to ride roughshod over federally minded yet politically loyal factions who were reluctant to see their authority subsumed into the national government, particularly since many of the *Gauleiter* whom he had appointed as regional rulers were close personal friends and allies from the 'time of struggle' before the Nazis had come to power.

The content of the book is divided into six very broadly chronological chapters, beginning with the Ministry's backstory as the Prussian Culture Ministry during the Second Reich and Weimar Republic (chapter one), then tracing the expansion of the Reich Ministry's capacity and responsibilities during the years of peace (chapters two to five), and concluding with its development and subsequent decline throughout the Nazi regime's belligerent final phase of conquest and annihilation (chapter six). As one might suppose, this weighting of the chapters does lead to a certain imbalance in the treatment of the war years and the Ministry's role in the occupied territories – a matter which will be discussed in more detail below. Nevertheless, it does allow Nagel plenty of opportunity richly to depict the texture of the Ministry's institutional life, including vignettes such as the licence with which, following Rust's removal from the ministerial apartment in the main building to a more exalted residence in the suburban district of Berlin-Dahlem, the secretaries began not only to brew tea and coffee, but also to cook and grill in-house, so that the Ministry's interior began to reek like a street-corner *Imbiß* (pp. 15–16).

The first chapter, 'Berlin "Unter den Linden"', sets the scene both literally and metaphorically, describing

the Ministry buildings in great detail (4) and tracing continuities between the contours of the Ministry's educational and cultural policies from 1871 to 1933 and those later to be pursued by Rust and the Reich Ministry, which in effect realised Prussian Culture Minister C. H. Becker's unfulfilled dream of 'a Prussian Ministry, which is simultaneously an institution of the Reich' (p. 67). Following a brief elucidation of the book's scope and objectives, we are taken on a whistle-stop tour of the Ministry's Prussian pre-history, encompassing what we might term the Wilhelmine *Bildungs*-boom, which heralded the far-reaching initiative of the Prussian educational reform conferences (*Schulkonferenzen*), and saw a massive increase in educational expenditure across the board, ranging from primary to tertiary education, which later contributed to the impressive scientific advancements made during the German war effort. Under the Weimar Republic, however, priorities changed; now the new Social Democratic government was almost as keen to 'republicanise' the Ministry and its endeavours as the Nazis would later be to 'national-socialise' them. Minister Becker therefore presided over a gradual process of democratisation, appointing a new team of younger, pedagogically-informed bureaucrats who could help him put his reforms into practice; however, the world financial crisis undid most of his achievements, as well as leading to swingeing cuts in the Ministry's administrative structure.

Nagel then gives us a brief biographical sketch of her main protagonist, Bernhard Rust, detailing his war service, his background as a classicist and schoolteacher, his post-war radicalisation and membership of right-wing groups such as the *Stahlhelm*, and his activities as *Gauleiter* of Hannover North (later Südhannover-Braunschweig, one of the 'brownest' regions of all) from 1925 onwards. During this time, Rust leaned more towards the 'Socialist' wing of the Party, and is even rumoured to have hosted a meeting at which Gregor Strasser, Goebbels and others raised the possibility of kicking Hitler out of the Party because his views were too 'petit bourgeois' (p. 44). Nevertheless, Rust and Goebbels soon became united in their adoration and admiration of the Führer, and this devotion, along with Rust's obvious talent for organisation and leadership at a regional level, made him (to Goebbels' never-ending chagrin) the most obvious choice to take on the Prussian Culture Ministry once the Party gained power. The final section in the chapter describes Rust's ministerial takeover – replacing Becker's republican bureaucrats with a young team of enthusiastically Nazi aides, and ruthlessly implementing the *Berufsbeamten-gesetz*, a law which immediately disqualified Communists, Jews, and other supposed enemies of the regime from office.

The second chapter explores the Ministry's various and wide-ranging competencies, including its attempts to gain control over further areas whilst simultaneously protecting its existing domains from incremental poaching. Logically, the Reich Ministry should have continued to bear the title *Kultusministerium* – as the Prussian Ministry had done – yet Goebbels' constant craving to monopolise all aspects of 'Culture' meant that the Ministry's short title became '*Reichserziehungsministerium*' (Reich Education Ministry) by default, except when dealing with university matters, when it was known as the *Reichswissenschaftsministerium* (p. 75). In this context, too, 'what's in a name?' had become a loaded question.(5) Nevertheless, despite incessant wrangling with the Ministry of the Interior and Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry over areas which had not yet been assigned, such as museums and heritage preservation, Rust still held sway over some 250,000 Ministry-employed officials throughout the Reich, from university professors to primary school teachers (p. 69). The number of civil servants also grew exponentially, so that everyday life in the Ministry was often characterised by acute frugality – main lights were never to be turned on except for large meetings (desk lamps alone should suffice), paper had to be used double-sided wherever possible, and one was never supposed to make a telephone call when a timely letter or two could sort the problem out just as well (p. 74). In order to safeguard his exalted position at the top of this bloated bureaucratic structure, the Minister completely reorganised the Ministry so that it more closely resembled a military hierarchy of command, with Rust himself playing the role of Generalissimo. Yet, in Nagel's view, Rust's diligence and devotion to the tasks before him were genuine; he did not treat his ministerial position as a mere sinecure. Even though Rust was working in the service of an evil regime, she implies, his dedication was still impressive (pp. 79–80). The rest of the chapter describes some of the problems of regional factionalism which made Rust's dream of centralisation so profoundly difficult to realise, as well as the tensions between the (often exorbitant) financial demands of Rust's Ministry and the cautious frugality of the Prussian and Reich Finance Ministries

under Johannes Popitz and Lutz Graf Schwerin von Krosigk respectively.

Chapter three, 'The hour of the experts: players and adversaries', describes the machinations and double-dealing which went on behind the scenes within the Ministry – and outside it. Whilst Rust was known for surrounding himself with a circle of relatively young aides, selected for their personal loyalty and professional competence (6), it was in the interest of other members of the Nazi elite to ensure that those with most loyalty to or contact with their own organisations or institutions should reach the top – and for those whom they disliked or distrusted to be ousted as quickly as possible. This led to a constant revolving-door scenario, in which the merest hint of racial or political unorthodoxy could lead to a swift end to one's career (the fate of Reinhard Sunkel or Helmut Bojunga being a case in point). Much could depend on who one's contacts or sponsors were, and whether the Party Chancellery, which had power over all appointments, was in one's favour. Nagel then goes on to provide a detailed catalogue of the Ministry's enemies, including the Amt Rosenberg, which was trying to gain more and more influence over cultural politics and academia, as well as planning to establish a competing system of 'Party universities', the Stab Hess, which insisted on vetting all university appointments, and the *Parteiamtliche Prüfungskommission*, which wanted to gain powers of censorship over all school textbooks (this is where Nagel's former neighbour is given the limelight). The worst of Rust's foes, however, was indubitably Goebbels, who was so embittered by Rust's having gained the position which he had coveted that he took every possible opportunity, no matter how banal, to stymie him, attempting to turn the Propaganda Ministry into a rival culture ministry, until the two institutions existed in a more-or-less perpetual state of war and mutual distrust. The controversy reached its most ludicrous proportions when Rosenberg and Goebbels briefly cooperated in trying to ban an academic *Festschrift* presented to Hitler by the Ministry's 'Amt Wissenschaft' for his 50th birthday (p. 145ff.). All in all, then, this chapter provides us with a textbook scenario of the constant factional infighting between the Ministries and other organisations, tellingly illuminated.

Chapter four focuses on Rust's scholastic reforms, detailing conflicts of interest with the Nazi Party, which wanted to make secondary education as brief, cheap and utilitarian as possible, and was unsympathetic to Rust's view of himself as a 'forester' who could not raise a new, Nazified generation in the blink of an eye (p. 153). Whilst Rust was still concerned to saturate schools with National Socialist ideology, he did not wish to 'break education over his knee', and Nagel stresses continuities between Rust's ideas and previous pedagogical thinking (p. 154). The chapter goes on to catalogue developments in various types of educational institution, including the reduction in the number of types of secondary school, the introduction of the compulsory four-year *Grundschule* (private primary education was no longer permissible), and changes in teacher-training and vocational education. Meanwhile, the fifth chapter analyses the state of affairs in universities and other academic institutions such as the *Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft* and the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, which were forced (more or less willingly) to accept the Ministry's control and focus upon military rather than purely scholarly priorities. Nagel nicely captures the Mephistophelian pact which academics made with the regime; despite the fundamental lack of respect for intellectualism in the Third Reich, and the fact that all early-career academics had to attend political training camps (*Dozentenlager*), it was possible to gain a university position at an earlier age than ever before, due to the dismissal of politically and racially undesirable professors, and the pay-scale was also substantially increased. Most interestingly, Nagel argues that recent research disproves the idea that National Socialism was wholly anti-academic – since large amounts of funding were apparently readily available even for humanities disciplines, and smaller universities, or esoteric subjects such as Oriental Studies, were retained because destroying them would damage Germany's international prestige. Both Rust and Hitler himself were convinced that humanities subjects should still be accorded some value; this is probably the main reason why tertiary education did not fall victim to industrial pragmatism, with universities reduced to the status of mere technical or vocational schools. Still, the idea that medicine courses could be shortened so much that trainee doctors were no longer expected to know the names of various nerves and muscles because they could 'read up on that afterwards', whilst they were nevertheless forced to participate in compulsory 'healing herb expeditions' (p. 218), hardly builds confidence in the regime's intellectual credentials.

The final chapter, 'The Ministry at war', skates quickly over the effects of the Anschluss with Austria and

the occupation of the Sudetenland, before touching very cursorily on the Ministry's role in the occupied territories during the Second World War (the subheading 'In the greater German Reich' is something of a misnomer here). Conditions soon deteriorated – both in terms of the circumstances in which the Ministry's ever-decreasing cohort of civil servants had to work, the public's loss of respect for cultural and academic endeavours, and the reduction of university teaching to the bare minimum to allow for military service. Meanwhile, the Party sought to interfere ever more frequently in educational matters, leading to absurdities such as Hitler's demand that schools should only start lessons at noon, or that all secondary schools should follow the Austrian system. Martin Bormann increasingly attempted to spread hostile rumours about Rust and have him replaced, though Hitler was never actually persuaded to do so until he drew up his last will and testament. However, despite being chronically overworked, and hampered by lack of resources and constant air-raid damage, the civil servants in the Ministry continued in their posts until March 1945 – and most of them also lived on and were able to continue their careers in the post-war period. Rust, however, fled to Schleswig Holstein, where the second of his two suicide attempts succeeded – the local pastor then refused to bury him, claiming that he was 'a godless and unchristian man' (p. 363).

Nagel stressed at the work's beginning that she aimed to challenge existing assumptions, as well as providing the first comprehensive history of one of the Third Reich's most important institutions. In both of these aims, she has succeeded, and she should undoubtedly be congratulated for making an important contribution to the scholarly literature. Nevertheless, there are certain criticisms which can be made of *Hitlers Bildungsreformer*. Most of these are structural, and concern choices about material which has been included or excluded from her survey.

For instance, it is often unclear why some incidents, meetings, or unfulfilled proposals are granted a considerable amount of space, at the expense of others which seem equally, if not more, important. An extreme example of this tendency is the nugatory treatment of education in the occupied territories – only three pages are devoted to primary and secondary education in Austria, and four to Bohemia, Moravia and the Sudetenland *in toto*; the rest of the Eastern and Western territories are then dismissed in two paragraphs. (7) Indeed, matters such as the Ministry's blackout measures are often treated in more detail than this – which can make the account seem strangely unbalanced. Sometimes, one also has the feeling that one has learnt more about the Ministry's unsuccessful attempts to put policy into practice than about those measures which they actually managed to put through.

Secondly, the chronology within the different sub-sections is not always as straightforward as the organisation of the chapters might suggest, with frequent skipping forward and backward in time which can be rather disconcerting. This is particularly apparent in chapter four, where Nagel traces the development of each different type of primary, secondary and vocational school separately; the details soon become repetitious. Similarly, the first section in chapter three can sometimes resemble a mere catalogue of personnel and potted biographies, without always containing quite enough spice in the biographical details to hold one's full attention.

In general terms, *Hitlers Bildungsreformer* is very much an *institutional* history, and has to be understood in this light – this focus explains (at least partially) the lack of attention to the victims of Rust's policies, such as Jewish children and the infirm, which distressed the H-Soz-u-Kult reviewer; more attention is given to disadvantaged civil servants instead. Nevertheless, this means that one can easily regret the lack of information on how decisions taken at Ministry level had a real impact on people in the classroom or the lecture theatre (if and when they did so). Often, it is hard to grasp the full implications of the legislation which Rust and his army of civil servants brought into being. Perhaps this is an unfair point; a book which focused on such consequences of the Ministry's activity would necessarily have been completely different. And yet, one of the most compelling passages in the entire book, a description of a Nazi specialist music school (*Musisches Gymnasium*) established in Frankfurt, includes exactly those personal touches (reasons why fathers refused to let their sons audition; reminiscences about a tour to Switzerland) which could have enlivened and humanised other aspects of Nagel's narration (pp. 199–202).

In the end, though, many of these quibbles could come down to the fact that there may just have been too much material to deal with, and a selection had to be made somehow in order to prevent the book from turning into a monster monograph, rather than a friendly Fischer black-jacket aimed at a popular audience. Whether such problems could have been alleviated if the publishers had seen fit to allow the author another couple of hundred pages' grace must remain an open question.

To conclude: this is an enlightening and extremely well-written book, as well as a ground-breaking study of one of the Third Reich's key institutions. Structural flaws or no, it repays careful appraisal, and will most probably remain the standard work on the Ministry for many years to come.

Notes

1. For example, see reviews in *The Daily Telegraph* <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/historybookreviews/9103580/The-Spanish-Holocaust-by-Paul-Preston-review.html> [3]> [accessed 22 January 2014], *The Wall Street Journal* <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303302504577325594229771470.html> [4]> [accessed 22 January 2014], and *Times Higher Education* <<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/419372.article> [5]> [accessed 22 January 2014].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Gerhard Kluchert, 'Rezension zu Nagel, Anne Christine: *Hitlers Bildungsreformer. Das Reichsministerium für Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung 1934–1945*', *H-Soz-u-Kult*, 21 May 2013 <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2013-2-124> [2]> [accessed 22 January 2014]. Ultimately, however, the book never fulfils its 'provocative' promise to explore forward-looking continuities, even if some of these can be extrapolated. We are only granted one speculative paragraph at the end – hardly what the blurb (or Kluchert's review) might have led us to expect...[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See *Die NS-Gaue: Regionale Mittelinstanzen im zentralistischen 'Führerstaat'*, ed. J. John, H. Möller, and T. Schaarschmidt (Munich, 2007).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Though one might wonder if the description becomes excessively minute at times – for instance, is it essential for the reader to know that the façade of the edifice on Unter den Linden was formed specifically of Wesselburg sandstone and Silesian granite?[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. In fact, the first part of the title of this chapter is 'More than just a name'.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. The Ministry was even supposed to have had its own 'anthem', which Rust's aides allegedly sang when having a drink at the *Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft*: 'Wir sind die Rustika, wir sind die Rustika, sowas war niemals da, sowas war niemals da!' (loosely: 'We are the Rusticans..., no one's seen our like before...!').[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Even if one accepts Nagel's contention that 'one can hardly speak of planned control of educational and academic politics in the territories occupied by the Third Reich' (p. 341), there is no excuse for not providing the reader with a reference to some further reading on the topic – e.g. G. Hansen, *Schulpolitik als Volkstumspolitik: Quellen zur Schulpolitik der Besatzer in Polen 1939–1945* (Munich, 1994) and H.-C. Harten, *De-Kulturation und Germanisierung: Die nationalsozialistische Rassen- und Erziehungspolitik in Polen 1939–1945* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996) on Poland. Interestingly, the bibliography does not seem to contain any non-German works.[Back to \(7\)](#)

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[4] <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303302504577325594229771470.html>

[5] <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/419372.article>