

Charles B. Lansing
*From Nazism to Communism: German
Schoolteachers under Two Dictatorships*

Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010. 307 pp.

J. Guy Lalande

St. Francis Xavier University

This richly documented book focuses on the complex relationships among the Prussian industrial city of Brandenburg an der Havel's pedagogues, their professional organizations, and the state during the Nazi and Communist periods (1933–1953).

The leaders of both authoritarian regimes firmly believed that education was central to their planned transformations of German politics, society, and economy. Such a conviction explains their many attempts to create a single corps of reliable and committed teachers, entrusted by the state with the indoctrination of German youth. To what extent, then, was their objective of transforming the teaching staff achieved? True, Lansing acknowledges, public lectures, specialized periodicals, and training camps changed the personal and professional lives of many of the city's teachers. Furthermore, education authorities subordinated curricula and lesson plans to their ideological mission—one that evolved from teaching biological racial determinism to the Marxist materialistic dialectic. Nevertheless, he argues that National Socialist and Communist policies failed to modify substantially the ideological and physical composition of the city's teaching staff. Indeed, though both regimes sought to eliminate undesirable pedagogues, whose previous political affiliations or actions violated the standards of the new party and state, their efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. A major factor that prevented Nazis and Communists from implementing a large-scale purge of teachers was the shortage of certified pedagogues, due to the Nazi conscription program and the increase in the number of students as many families moved to Brandenburg, either to work in its growing armaments industry or as returnees to Germany from formerly conquered lands in the east at the end of the war. Furthermore, to keep the schools running during the Second World War and its chaotic aftermath proved to be particularly challenging. Many school buildings

were damaged or fully destroyed. Some teachers were sent to fight at the front, where many were either killed or injured; others were transferred to schools in Poland, and many more left in Brandenburg were dragooned into a variety of activities outside of the classroom, such as nightly air raid duty and collection of materials needed for the war effort. An influx of mostly untrained female school helpers eased, but did not completely solve, the problem. Similarly, the attempt to recruit and train new teachers (*Neulehrer*) after 1945 had at best mixed results.

Though confronted with a mixture of radical changes in the workplace, these men and women showed during all these years a remarkable ability to adapt to changing ideological, economic, social, and political circumstances. In other words, they refused to be instrumentalized for ideological ends. By providing both dictatorships with only minimal support for their revolutionary projects, they managed to defend their professional and political autonomy, in spite of far-reaching encroachments into their lives by government-controlled teachers' unions. Their ability to insulate themselves from active involvement in the uprising of 17 June 1953 further illustrates this point: on that day, the vast majority of Brandenburg's teachers remained in their classroom and continued their normal routine. The continuity of personnel in the period 1933–1953, Lansing concludes, contributed to the teaching staff's ability to maintain a high degree of collective professional disengagement.

A very readable, though at times unnecessarily repetitive, study that draws on Russian and German archival collections as well as oral histories, this monograph will appeal to specialists of the Third Reich and Communist East Germany (in particular, those with a special interest in the controversial question of continuity and discontinuity in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century), to scholars studying trade unions movements, and to historians of education. Many readers will readily notice the numerous points of convergence between Nazism and communism. Those involved in the trenches of the classroom will likely appreciate the resiliency, courage, and intellectual honesty of so many teachers who, in spite of so many challenges and pressures, remained faithful to the ideals of classical humanism and to a long tradition of independence among German professionals.