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The Biopolitics of Education in the Third Reich's 'Special Schools' and 'Elite Schools'

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Abstract

While discussion of eugenics and biopolitics during the Third Reich has largely focused upon the regime's most destructive and genocidal policies, this article concentrates on Nazi 'special schools' and 'elite schools' as a crucial sphere of quasi-eugenic thought and praxis, drawing attention to education as a previously under-researched category of intervention in the history of modern biopolitics. The article also sheds new light on the racialized nature of the Nazi 'national community' (the *Volksgemeinschaft*), and contributes to recent debates on the Third Reich's status as a 'racial state' which suggest that the National Socialist regime was driven less by fanatical adherence to racial ideology, and more by a mixture of anthropological and eugenic racism, combined with productivist pragmatism. The two case-studies draw attention to less familiar corners of the National Socialist pedagogical landscape, covering both extremes of the spectrum of biological selection in education, from the negative, eugenic policies applied to supposedly 'abnormal' pupils at the so-called 'special schools' (*Hilfsschulen*), to the 'positive' biological selection of elite-school applicants at the National Political Education Institutes (*Nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalten*, NPEA), the regime's principal training institutions for the future elite of the Third Reich.

I

Since the publication just over thirty years ago of Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ippermann's *The racial state: Germany 1933–1945*, scholarly debates have ranged widely regarding the precise nature of National Socialist 'biopolitics'.¹

¹ Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ippermann, *The racial state: Germany 1933–1945* (Cambridge, 1991); see in particular Edward Ross Dickinson, 'Biopolitics, fascism, democracy: some reflections

Understandably, discussion has largely focused upon the Third Reich's most destructive and genocidal policies, and in particular those which led to the Holocaust: when it comes to the mechanisms of selection (*Auslese*) and eradication (*Ausmerze*) which the Nazi 'gardening state' used to control its 'Aryan' citizens in order to fulfil its dystopian vision of a biologically and racially purified society,² the extent of complicity within the medical and scientific professions, and the programmes of sterilization and 'euthanasia' of those deemed 'unworthy' which they helped to design and implement, have usually taken centre stage.³ After all, it was precisely these aspects of Nazism which led two of the foremost exponents of biopolitical theory, Michel Foucault and Roberto Esposito, to characterize Nazism as the most extreme manifestation of biopolitics ever seen in human history.⁴

on our discourse about "modernity"', *Central European History*, 37 (2004), pp. 1–48; Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: revolutionary ethics, eugenics, and racism in Germany* (Basingstoke, 2004); Christopher M. Hutton, *Race and the Third Reich: linguistics, racial anthropology and genetics in the dialectic of Volk* (Cambridge, 2005); David L. Hoffmann and Annette F. Timm, 'Utopian biopolitics: reproductive policies, gender roles, and sexuality in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union', in Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism compared* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 87–129; Paul Weindling, 'German eugenics and the wider world: beyond the racial state', in Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, eds., *The Oxford handbook of the history of eugenics* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 315–28, and the recent volume edited by Devin O. Pendas, Mark Roseman, and Richard F. Wetzell, *Beyond the racial state: rethinking Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, 2017), especially the contributions by Pascal Grosse, Richard F. Wetzell, and Herwig Czech. In this context, we define biopolitics along Foucauldian lines, as a technology of state power which seeks to discipline the collective bodies of its subjects, to control demographics, and to neutralize those considered dispensable, by means of regulatory measures applied to the population at large – see Michel Foucault, *Society must be defended: lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (London, 2003), pp. 243–6.

² On the concept of the 'gardening state', see Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and interpreters* (Cambridge, 1987); Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1989), esp. pp. 13, 18, 57, 91–3, 113–14.

³ See Michael Burleigh, *Death and deliverance: 'euthanasia' in Germany c. 1900–1945* (Cambridge, 1994); Henry Friedlander, *The origins of Nazi genocide: from euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995); Suzanne E. Evans, *Forgotten crimes: the Holocaust and people with disabilities* (Chicago, IL, 2004); Andreas Hedwig and Dirk Petter, eds., *Auslese der Starken – 'Ausmerzung' der Schwachen. Eugenik und NS-Euthanasie' im 20. Jahrhundert* (Marburg, 2017). Older volumes which are still frequently cited in this connection include Peter Weingart et al., *Rasse, Blut und Gene. Geschichte der Eugenik und Rassenhygiene in Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988), and Paul Weindling, *Health, race and German politics between national unification and Nazism, 1870–1945* (Cambridge, 1989).

⁴ Foucault, *Society*, p. 82; Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: biopolitics and philosophy* (Minneapolis, MN, 2008), p. 10. For further contextualization of the analysis of biopolitics in both of these works, see David Macey, 'Rethinking biopolitics, race and power in the wake of Foucault', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 26 (2009), pp. 186–205; Timothy Campbell, 'Bíos, immunity, life: the thought of Roberto Esposito', in Esposito, *Bíos*, pp. vii–xlii. On general similarities between eugenic thinking throughout Europe and North America during this period, see David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, 'The eugenic Atlantic: race, disability, and the making of an international eugenic science, 1800–1945', *Disability and Society*, 18 (2003), pp. 843–64; Coreen McGuire, *Measuring difference, numbering normal: setting the standards for disability in the interwar period* (Manchester, 2020).

In this article, we aim to broaden the scope of such discussions, both in terms of the nature of Nazi racial policy, and in relation to broader debates on biopolitics in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century, by drawing attention to education as a previously under-researched category of biopolitical intervention.⁵ In this connection, we intend to draw particular attention to two types of educational institutions which have been largely overlooked, both within the overall historiography of the Third Reich, and in specific scholarship on education in Nazi Germany.⁶ While a certain body of scholarship on 'special education' under Nazism does exist, it has been penned for the most part by contemporary pedagogues in this field who have been most concerned to legitimize their own institutional background, and to indulge in exculpatory myth-making which exonerates teachers at such institutions under Nazism from any suspicion of eugenic thought or praxis. The most trustworthy scholarship on these institutions is therefore the work of 'outsiders' who are not implicated in this closed circle of disciplinary hagiography, such as Werner Brill and Dagmar Hänsel, and readers are advised to consult their work for further reference.⁷

⁵ As opposed to more general children's welfare, or neonatal health, on which see Lisa Pine, *Nazi family policy, 1933–1945* (Oxford, 1997); and Michelle Mouton, *From nurturing the nation to purifying the Volk: Weimar and Nazi family policy, 1918–1945* (Cambridge, 2007). With very few exceptions, such as Maria Bucur's *Eugenics and modernization in interwar Romania* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2002), which contains a chapter on 'Education and inborn characteristics', and Michèle Hofmann's 'A weak mind in a weak body? Categorising intellectually disabled children in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Switzerland', *History of Education*, 48 (2019), pp. 452–65, scholarship treating eugenics and other forms of biopolitical intervention tends not to engage with pedagogical ideas or institutions: e.g. Frank Dikötter, 'Race culture: recent perspectives on the history of eugenics', *American Historical Review*, 103 (1998), pp. 467–78; Robert A. Nye, 'The rise and fall of the eugenics empire: recent perspectives on the impact of biomedical thought in modern society', *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), pp. 687–700; Ross Dickinson, 'Biopolitics'; Marius Turda, *Modernism and eugenics* (Basingstoke, 2010); Jakob Tanner, 'Eugenics before 1945', *Journal of Modern European History*, 10 (2012), pp. 458–79. Meanwhile, works which focus on education and youth in this period do not tend to take an explicitly biopolitical perspective: e.g. Edward Ross Dickinson, *The politics of German child welfare from the empire to the Federal Republic* (Cambridge, MA, 1996); Barbara Schneider, *Die höhere Schule im Nationalsozialismus. Zur Ideologisierung von Bildung und Erziehung* (Cologne, 2000); Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of war: children's lives under the Nazis* (London, 2006); Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped souls: national indifference and the battle for children in the Bohemian lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca, NY, 2008); Klaus-Peter Horn and Jörg-W. Link, eds., *Erziehungsverhältnisse im Nationalsozialismus. Totaler Anspruch und Erziehungswirklichkeit* (Bad Heilbrunn, 2011); Jürgen Finger, *Eigensinn im Einheitsstaat. NS-Schulpolitik in Württemberg, Baden und im Elsass 1933–1945* (Baden-Baden, 2016).

⁶ For recent surveys of education under the Nazi regime, see e.g. Wolfgang Keim, *Erziehung unter der Nazi-Diktatur* (2 vols., Darmstadt, 1995–7); Schneider, *Die höhere Schule*; Lisa Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany* (Oxford, 2010). On racial ideology and education, see Hans-Christian Harten, Uwe Neirich, and Matthias Schwerendt, *Rassenhygiene als Erziehungsideologie des Dritten Reichs. Bio-bibliographisches Handbuch* (Berlin, 2006). On educational policy, see Anne C. Nagel, *Hitlers Bildungsreformer. Das Reichsministerium für Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung, 1934–1945* (Frankfurt am Main, 2012).

⁷ See Werner Brill, *Pädagogik der Abgrenzung. Die Implementierung der Rassenhygiene im Nationalsozialismus durch die Sonderpädagogik* (Bad Heilbrunn, 2011), pp. 9–10, 140ff.; Dagmar Hänsel, *Sonderschule im Nationalsozialismus. Die Magdeburger Hilfsschule als Modell* (Bad Heilbrunn, 2019), pp. 12–13, ch. 2 passim.

This article explores some of the less familiar corners of the National Socialist educational landscape, covering both extremes of the spectrum of biological selection in education, from the negative, eugenic policies applied to supposedly ‘abnormal’ pupils at the so-called ‘special schools’ or *Hilfsschulen*, to the ‘positive’ biological selection of elite-school applicants at the National Political Education Institutes (*Nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalten*, most commonly known as NPEA or Napolas), the regime’s principal training institutions for the future elite of the Third Reich. By focusing on Nazi ‘special schools’ and ‘elite schools’ as a crucial sphere of quasi-eugenic thought and praxis, we not only shed new light on the racialized nature of the Nazi ‘national community’ (*Volksgemeinschaft*), but also contribute to recent debates on the ‘racial state’ which suggest that the National Socialist regime was driven less by fanatical adherence to racial ideology, and more by a mixture of anthropological and eugenic racism, combined with socio-economic, neo-Darwinist, productivist pragmatism.⁸ Our findings suggest that the bioracially inflected category of ‘human material’ (*Menschenmaterial*) applied not only to those whom the Nazi regime deemed to be expendable, but also to its most highly selected and lionized future elites. Only by considering the continual biopolitical calculus which reigned over the sphere of education – as well as that which governed the realms of extermination and medical experimentation – can we gain a more nuanced appreciation of the control which the regime ultimately desired to exert over every single one of its surviving citizens.⁹

Educational policy during the Third Reich had always reflected the Nazi regime’s fundamental ideological and social Darwinist assumptions, attempting to form youthful members of the body politic in the image of the National Socialist ‘new man’.¹⁰ After the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, educational institutions were swiftly subjected to a concerted policy of *Gleichschaltung* (‘co-ordination’). Membership of the National Socialist Teachers’ Association (NSLB) was made compulsory for all members of the teaching profession, and those selected to uphold the Third Reich’s newly racialized educational community could enjoy unprecedented authority, status, and prestige.¹¹ The article begins by investigating the biopolitical discourse surrounding pupils at ‘special schools’, and their selection according to fundamentally eugenic and social

⁸ On the distinction between ‘eugenic’ and ‘anthropological’ racism, see Gisela Bock, *Zwangsterilisation im Nationalsozialismus. Studien zur Rassenpolitik und Geschlechterpolitik* (2nd edn, Münster, 2010). On the blending of economic and racial factors, see especially the chapters in Pendas, Roseman, and Wetzell, eds., *Beyond the Racial State*, by Herwig Czech (‘Nazi medical crimes, eugenics, and the limits of the racial state paradigm’, pp. 212–38), and Stefan Hördler (‘The disintegration of the racial basis of the concentration camp system’, pp. 482–507).

⁹ See Jan Erik Schulte, ‘Die “Euthanasie”-Tötungsanstalt Hadamar und die Ausdehnung der Mordaktionen 1942 bis 1945’, in Hedwig and Petter, eds., *Auslese der Starken*, pp. 117–35.

¹⁰ For more on the ideal of the ‘new man’, see Peter Fritzsche and Jochen Hellbeck, ‘The new man in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany’, in Geyer and Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond totalitarianism*, pp. 302–41; also Jorge Dagnino, Matthew Feldman, and Paul Stocker, eds., *The ‘new man’ in radical right ideology and practice, 1919–45* (London, 2018).

¹¹ See Charles Lansing, *From Nazism to communism: German schoolteachers under two dictatorships* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), esp. ch. 3.

Darwinist criteria, before moving on to treat the biopolitical anxieties revealed in the NPEA selection process, which also subjected all candidates (and all pupils) to constant scrutiny lest they should reveal potential biological or 'racial' defects and weaknesses. The conclusion then situates this analysis within the context of broader literature on biopolitics, as well as current debates concerning the National Socialist 'racial state', and the exclusionary and inclusionary nature of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*. Taken together, the *Hilfsschulen* and the NPEA can be seen as political laboratories: sites of educational experimentation in which the regime's drive to evaluate the entire population according to a potentially lethal form of cost-benefit analysis or 'biosocial arithmetic' (focused above all on the alleged biological value and socio-economic productivity of each human life) can be seen in microcosm.

II

Deep-seated anxieties about the social worth and potential utility to society of children at so-called 'remedial' or 'special' schools (*Hilfsschulen/Sonderschulen*) had been rife among German pedagogues and educational theorists since at least the late nineteenth century.¹² However, with the advent of the Third Reich, such theoretical disciplinary discussions were to take on a distinctly more pragmatic – and fatally utilitarian – form. Following the promulgation of the notorious sterilization law (*Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses*) in July 1933, teachers at the *Hilfsschulen* for the most part eagerly embraced the idea that they should treat their youthful charges as a reservoir (*Sammelbecken*) of potential candidates for future sterilization, often keeping minutious reports on their disabilities and progress in order to trace supposedly hereditary 'defects', and sometimes even going so far as to compile detailed information on pupils' immediate family and genealogical records as well.¹³ This constant biopolitical scrutiny was considered to be an essential form of service to the body politic, and one of the most crucial that a teacher working in 'special education' could render.¹⁴ Ultimately, pupils at 'special schools' were only seen as worthy of attention and further education if they could later prove their social 'utility' (*Brauchbarkeit*) by taking on jobs, however menial, within the *Volksgemeinschaft*, rather than becoming a direct financial burden on the state.¹⁵

This section explores prevalent discourse on pupils at 'special' schools through the lens of relevant material held at the German Federal Archives in Berlin Lichterfelde, including pamphlets, memos, and treatises penned by educators, government documents and official Education Ministry guidelines,

¹² See Hänsel, *Sonderschule*, pp. 25–6. Terms used in original Nazi documents have been retained in order to faithfully reproduce historical sources, retain the original meaning of the sources, and show linguistic development while avoiding anachronistic terminology. However, they have been placed in inverted commas throughout, given the potentially offensive nature of such terminology.

¹³ For a particularly egregious example of this tendency, see letter, 19 Feb. 1934, Bundesarchiv Lichterfelde, Berlin (BArch), R 4901/3266a, Bl. 79.

¹⁴ E.g. Alfred Krampf, 'Nationalsozialismus und Hilfsschule', BArch, R 4901/3266a, Bl. 83ff.

¹⁵ See below; also in particular the memos and drafts contained in BArch, NS 12/825.

press reports, and material from the NSLB's *Fachschaft V*, which was dedicated exclusively to teachers at this type of institution.¹⁶ The ideas presented here were prevalent from the dawn of the Third Reich onwards, but grew only more virulent, more codified, and hence more destructive as time wore on. The ultimate aim of many teachers was both to facilitate the eugenic eradication of 'hereditarily unfit' children from the population as a whole, and to convince those affected that their sterilization was an entirely necessary and appropriate sacrifice for the good of the *Volksgemeinschaft*.¹⁷ By the eve of the Second World War, the network of remedial and special schools (both public and private) encompassed 1,064 schools, and 360 primary schools with 'special classes' – affecting a total of 115,996 children, including those at schools specifically for the blind, deaf, hearing-, speech-, or vision-impaired, and the physically disabled.¹⁸

One of the most frequently espoused concepts which recurs in material on the *Hilfsschulen* is that of the necessity of constant 'selection' (*Auslese*) along biopolitical lines. Thus, one press account from a training workshop organized by the NSLB *Gaufachschäftsleiter* (regional leader of the *Fachschaft*) at the House of German Education averred that:

from the ashes of the welfare-moron school of earlier times, the German special school arises as the *school of achievement* for disabled German youth. But this [can] only occur after the strictest combing out of those who are fit and have the will to achieve ... Alongside the task of training and education stands the other, great, state-biological task of compulsory selection. The special school bears the character of an *Ausleseschule* [highly selective school], in which the racial-biological crisis is most clearly recognizable in the form of affected clans, and in which we are therefore called into the vanguard to collaborate in the ethnic renewal of our race.¹⁹

From this perspective, primary schools were seen as the key collection point from which the disadvantaged had to be 'combed out' according to the principles of 'negative selection', with the selection process itself representing a site of significant anxiety, where crucial distinctions must be made between those children with 'minor' mental disabilities and those with 'severe' ones – that is, those who were seen as wholly ineducable, bound only for private care, asylums, and, eventually, the T4 'euthanasia' killing

¹⁶ The files primarily consulted include: NS 12/551, NS 12/808, NS 12/809, NS 12/825, NS 12/842, NS 12/1357, R 2/12615, R 36/2158, R 3903/1949, R 4901/3266a. As such, this part of the article also forms a counterpoint to works of scholarship such as Brill's *Pädagogik der Abgrenzung*, which take as the majority of their source base works published in the organs of *Fachschaft V* and other periodicals. For more on the history of the *Fachschaft*, see Hänsel, *Sonderschule*, ch. 6.

¹⁷ For more on this, see Hänsel, *Sonderschule*, ch. 15.

¹⁸ *Berufskundliche Mitteilungen*, 2, 15 Feb. 1940, BArch, R 3903/1949.

¹⁹ 'Die Erziehungsaufgabe an Sorgenkindern', *Pressebericht*, 6 Nov. 1937, BArch, NS 12/1357, emphasis in original. For very similar sentiments, see e.g. report from Gau Oberpfalz-Niederbayern *Fachschaft V* to *Kreisfachgruppenleiter*, Straubing, 12 July 1935, BArch, NS 12/842.

centres.²⁰ Conditions such as epilepsy, and various types of physical, visual, or sensory impairment, might also be recommended for ‘eradication’ according to these criteria.²¹ One fundamental concern here was that ‘normal’ children at primary schools should be freed from the ‘ballast’ of their less able comrades – and that a truly useful education for the latter group could only be achieved if they were segregated from their cohort at large and educated separately. It was believed that both groups would thereby be able to attain higher educational goals and achievements (*Leistung*) than if they remained in the same institution.²²

Proponents of the *Hilfsschulen* therefore argued that popular perceptions of their student body as ‘imbeciles’, ‘idiots’, or the ‘severely handicapped’ were wholly erroneous, making a wide range of suggestions for ways in which the selection process could weed such faulty ‘human material’ out of their institutions, just as their own clientele had been ‘combed out’ of ‘normal’ primary schools.²³ These suggestions were also eagerly accepted by officials and government representatives in the education sector.²⁴ Masterminded by teachers and NSLB leaders, this led to an increasing push towards a unified Reich-wide selection process for the *Hilfsschulen*, with Reich education minister Bernhard Rust’s initial guidelines, the ‘General decree for *Hilfsschulen* in Prussia’ (8 April 1938), which applied to Prussia alone, acting as a bellwether for policy in other federal states, and ultimately setting up a code of practice which reached its fullest extent in the promulgation of the Education Ministry’s ‘Guidelines for training and education in the *Hilfsschulen*’ (18 February 1942), which applied throughout the ‘Greater German Reich’.²⁵

Primary-school teachers were expected to keep a close eye on their charges, and make note of any who were obviously falling behind the requisite standard after their first two years of schooling. In these cases, a committee – often consisting of the headmaster, school doctor and/or representative of the local health authority, and representatives from the *Hilfsschule* – would consider each case in detail. Any decision-making was necessarily accompanied by a plethora of bureaucratic measures, potentially including psychiatric evaluation, the provision of extensive information on pupils’ scholastic attainments

²⁰ See e.g. letter from Alfred Krampf, 11 Mar. 1935 (Intelligenzprüfungsbogen zum Gutachten), BArch, NS 12/808; also BArch, NS 12/842, which contains numerous reports stressing the importance of ‘negative *Auslese*’.

²¹ Brill, *Pädagogik der Abgrenzung*, p. 87; see also drafts and memoranda in BArch, NS 12/825.

²² For such sentiments, see e.g. BArch, R 36/2158, especially Bl. 276 (Deutscher Gemeindetag to Reichsinnenministerium, 18 Jan. 1938); also Bl. 297ff.; Karl Tornow, ‘Die Zukunft der Hilfsschule’, *Volksschule*, 33, no. 3 (May 1937), pp. 84–8; Herbert Weinert, ‘Warum Sonderschulen?’, 7 Oct. 1938, BArch, R 3903/1949; *Berufskundliche Mitteilungen*, 25. Sept. 1942.

²³ See e.g. ‘Hat die Heilpädagogik noch Berechtigung? Angriffe gegen die Hilfsschule und ihre Abwehr’, *Der Kulturpolitische Dienst*, 31 Mar. 1936; ‘Ist die Hilfsschule noch zeitgemäß?’, *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 25 May 1937; Tornow, ‘Zukunft’, pp. 87–8.

²⁴ For examples, see BArch, R 36/2158, Bl. 211, 252, 302.

²⁵ ‘Allgemeine Anordnung über die Hilfsschulen in Preußen’, BArch, R 2/12615; ‘Richtlinien für Erziehung und Unterricht in Hilfsschulen’, *Deutsche Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung* (1942), p. 78.

and family background, and, in many cases, the pupil's 'racial' antecedents.²⁶ Some *Hilfsschulen*, such as that at Magdeburg, also popularized a form of extended entrance test which lasted several days, during which candidates' behaviour was particularly scrutinized in group settings; their 'character' and social and practical skills were assessed, as well as their intellectual aptitude (this process came to be known as the 'Magdeburg method', and was propagated fairly widely).²⁷

However, such intense scrutiny was not reserved solely for the *Hilfsschule* entrance test. Many teachers, sometimes without even the sanction of official approval, continued to collect not only the requisite information for each pupil's personal record, but also genealogical data which could contribute to later decision-making as to whether the individual in question should be sterilized.²⁸ The form of pupils' personal records became more rigidly codified in pursuit of this aim, with plans for a Reich-wide diagnostic form (*Personalbogen*) being gradually refined and developed over the course of the later 1930s, until it was finally published by the Education Ministry on 2 March 1940.²⁹ If they had been considered important before, pupils' family trees now formed an essential piece of the puzzle which would allow teachers at the *Hilfsschulen* to collaborate with the medical profession in condemning many of their charges to compulsory infertility in the name of the 'racial cleansing' of the body politic.³⁰

Many teachers perceived this 'racial-biological' task as a crucial legitimization and vindication of their profession; an ungainsayable argument in favour of the continued existence of the *Hilfsschulen*, at a time when some officials in local government and other dissenting voices saw any expenditure on those with learning disabilities as an unconscionable waste of funding and resources

²⁶ For early examples of selection practices at the *Hilfsschulen*, see 'Grundsätze über Aufnahme der schwachbefähigten Kinder in die Hilfsschule in Quedlinburg', BArch, R 36/2168, Bl. 134–5; 'Landeslehrplan für die Hilfsschulen Sachsens', BArch, NS 12/551; BArch, R 4901/3266a, Bl. 431, 492ff.

²⁷ 'Bericht über die Gautagung der Fachschaft 5. am 23. Januar 1937 in Düsseldorf', report on 'Die Hallesche Methode für Auswahl der hilfsschulbedürftigen Kinder', BArch, NS 12/842. See also Hänsel, *Sonderschule*, ch. 10; Karl Tornow and Gustav Lenz, *Das Magdeburger Verfahren. Anleitung zur Durchführung der Aussonderung hilfsschulbedürftiger Kinder unter Berücksichtigung des neuen Personalbogens für Hilfsschüler* (Munich, 1942).

²⁸ See e.g. Stolze, 'Reisebericht', p. 7, BArch, R 4901/3266a; 'Bericht über die Gautagung der Fachschaft 5. am 23. Januar 1937 in Düsseldorf', report on 'Arbeitsgemeinschaft Erb- und Rassenpflege', BArch, NS 12/842.

²⁹ BArch, R 4901/3266a, Bl. 79, 186, 296, 362, 365, 383; Gau Westfalen-Nord, Tätigkeitsbericht IV/1935, BArch, NS 12/842; Tätigkeitsbericht – NSLB Gau Pommern, report, 21 Oct. 1935, BArch, NS 12/842; also Albert Wiegand, 'Die Zusammenarbeit zwischen Volksschule und Hilfsschule im Dienste der Erbpflege', *Volksschule*, 33, no. 3 (May 1937), pp. 89–92. See, more generally, Brill, *Pädagogik der Abgrenzung*, ch. 9.

³⁰ See e.g. 'NSLB Gau Ost-Hannover, Harburg-Wbg, 15 Oktober 1935 – Vierteljahrsbericht', BArch, NS 12/842; Hänsel, *Sonderschule*, pp. 151, 154, and ch. 8 passim; Brill, *Pädagogik der Abgrenzung*, esp. chs. 5 and 11.

which ought to be spent on 'normal' children at primary school.³¹ The Reich Education Ministry colluded in bolstering teachers' sense of the paramount significance of this eugenic task, with ministerial guidelines on the whys and wherefores of transferring children from primary schools to *Hilfsschulen* stressing that 'the efforts of our [National Socialist] state in terms of hereditary racial health (*Erbgesundheit*) make the establishment of the *Hilfsschule* and its active collaboration in reaching these goals an unconditional necessity'; to leave any child who should be attending a *Hilfsschule* at primary school was considered an offence against the national interest of the utmost severity.³² Indeed, Rust was still planning a wholesale expansion of the *Hilfsschule* system, exigencies of wartime notwithstanding, in 1942–3.³³

Articles in the national media, as well as in educational and scientific journals, praised the *Hilfsschule*'s role as 'the most important reservoir of feeble-minded people, [providing] the necessary documentation required for the carrying out of the [sterilization] law'.³⁴ Pedagogues in 'special education' took pride in the fact that no other authority could replace their 'subject-specific training and year-in, year-out observation and exact knowledge of [their pupils]; their familial circumstances; their milieu'.³⁵ In the service of this aim, some educators even recommended that pupils' parents should be invited to parent-teacher discussions or have regular home visits at which the teacher could inspect them alongside their other children, in order that their level of hereditary 'weakness' could be assessed, to pre-empt such information being lost once the pupils had left school and their parents might have died, at the time of life when final decisions about the necessity or otherwise of sterilization might generally be made.³⁶ The greater the proportion of siblings attending a *Hilfsschule*, the more likely that the teacher would deliver a verdict of 'congenital feeble-mindedness' (*angeborener Schwachsinn*), and assessments of children such as the following could potentially condemn both them and their families to further negative judgement or institutionalization: 'Karl X., born 16 May 1926, admitted at Easter 1932, currently in Year 3. He has repeated a year twice. His achievements in reading and in lessons on the homeland are satisfactory, defective in arithmetic and spelling. He is a persistent liar and truant.

³¹ See e.g. Krampf, 'Nationalsozialismus und Hilfsschule'. On hostility to the *Hilfsschulen* from other quarters, see e.g. BAArch, R 36/2158, Bl. 130–1, 144, 175–6, 249, 274. However, it is very important to note that such hostility was never as prevalent as proponents of the *Hilfsschulen* claimed, both during and after the Nazi dictatorship – the schools were never in any meaningful sense 'under threat' (see n. 7 above).

³² 'Überweisung von Kindern in die Hilfsschule', *Deutsche Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung* (Oct. 1935), p. 492.

³³ Reich Education Ministry to Reich Finance Ministry, 27 May 1942 and 15 Jan. 1943, BAArch, R 2/12615.

³⁴ 'Ist die Hilfsschule noch zeitgemäß?'. See also Tornow, 'Zukunft', pp. 85–6; Karl Tornow, 'Die Hilfsschule eine Sonderschule: die grundsätzliche Einstellung der Hilfsschullehrerschaft zur Hilfsschule und deren volksbiologischer Sinn', *Deutsche Erzieher*, no. 2 (Feb. 1941), pp. 39–43.

³⁵ Tornow, 'Zukunft', p. 86.

³⁶ Wiegand, 'Zusammenarbeit', pp. 90–1.

He stammers.³⁷ Physical characteristics such as hydrocephaly, a limp, or a severe stutter could also form part of such negative assessments, as well as more ‘characterological’ judgements.³⁸

Such sentiments as ‘better that no more children should be born to a questionable *Hilfsschule*-family, than that even once in a *single* case progenitors of entire criminal or psychopathic tribes should be created’ were also quite common in disciplinary discussions among special educators, with many teachers’ ultimate aim being to arrive at a point where far fewer children would need to be educated at *Hilfsschulen* because all instances of hereditary disability would have been eradicated via eugenic means.³⁹ Until that keenly awaited juncture, however, special educators and the state alike were adamant above all that the curricula at the *Hilfsschulen* and *Sonderschulen* should ensure their pupils’ socio-economic and sociopolitical ‘utility’ in later life. This formed the other key justification for these institutions’ existence, and represents a theme which recurs repeatedly in the relevant sources, ranging from drafts of pedagogical treatises and minutes of informal discussions right the way up to the ministerial decrees mentioned above. Indeed, it was not uncommon for highly influential pedagogues to suggest that

The physically and mentally damaged member of the race only has a right to public training and education, in so far as the possibility exists that he can thereby be categorized as part of the *Volksgemeinschaft* and be made into a still useful member of German economic, cultural and national life.⁴⁰

Methods might vary between the *Hilfsschulen*, which dealt with a wide range of categories of learning disability, and the *Sonderschulen*, which individually catered to the more specific needs of the blind, deaf-mute, vision-, speech-, or hearing-impaired, or the more severely physically disabled.⁴¹ However, the stress on preparing as high a percentage of school-leavers as possible for menial jobs, or careers which lay within the specific remit of their

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁹ Wilhelm Neidhardt, ‘Gutachten zur Übersteigerung der Anormalen-Erziehung (aus dem Weber’schen Programm)’, 25 Nov. 1934, pp. 4–5, BArch, NS 12/825, emphasis in original; see also e.g. Rudolf Justinus, assessment of A. Krampf, ‘Intelligenzprüfungsbogen zum Gutachten’, 11 Mar. 1935, BArch, NS 12/809.

⁴⁰ Tornow, ‘Zukunft’, p. 84.

⁴¹ See e.g. ‘Heilerziehung und Heilerzieher im Dritten Reich’, 1933, BArch, NS 12/825; ‘NSLB Gau Schlesien – Tätigkeitsbericht der Gaufachgruppe für Lehrer an Taubstummen-, Schwerhörigen und Sprachheilschulen über das Sommerhalbjahr 1935’, BArch, NS 12/842; Eduard Scholz, ‘Das taubstumme Kind’, *Volksschule*, 33, no. 3 (May 1937), pp. 92–4. Interestingly, teachers at the *Sonderschulen* were often keen to emphasize distinctions between their clientele and those at the *Hilfsschulen*, stressing the extremely high percentage of their charges who were later able to obtain full employment and become reliable tax-payers, and attempting to defend them against blanket charges of ‘hereditary’ disability. Meanwhile, some proponents of the *Hilfsschulen* felt that their cause could actually be better served if the *Hilfsschulen* were specifically recategorized as a form of *Sonderschule* (see e.g. Tornow, ‘Die Hilfsschule eine Sonderschule’).

disability, was constant. Curricula were very specifically designed to provide children with a level of literacy, numeracy, and basic reasoning sufficient to cope with such a role in the *Volksgemeinschaft* and the national economy, while additionally emphasizing simple vocational skills such as woodworking, or, in the case of girls, tasks oriented towards future employment as domestic servants.⁴²

Reports on the *Hilfsschulen* praised the idea that,

according to many trustworthy statistics, around 80% of graduated *Hilfsschule* pupils are fit for work and can at the very least earn enough to support themselves through their own labour. Thereby the funds are spared, which without precautionary curative education ... would have to be spent on the depraved, asocials, the unfit to work, and those in care.⁴³

Not only were such facts used to emphasize the economic necessity of the *Hilfsschulen*, but this utilitarian calculus could even take on a wholly militaristic bent if its focus were set upon former pupils' ability to contribute to war efforts past, present, and future. As one *Hilfsschule* doctor from Hanover averred during the Second World War, the great majority of former pupils

can absolutely achieve something in their lives or have already done so, as the example of two aircraft pilots from the *Hilfsschule* 4 in Hanover proves, who on their return from the field were recently decorated with the Iron Cross First Class and silver Front Flying Clasp of the Luftwaffe. Alongside them countless former *Hilfsschule* pupils do their duty as soldiers with weapons in hand, or work in munitions ...⁴⁴

Above all, emphasis was placed on furthering the interests of those children who were perceived as educable (*bildungsfähig*), as Education Ministry guidelines for the *Hilfsschulen* put it.⁴⁵ Ultimately, many teachers might conclude that 'our task ... is only fulfilled, when healthy, comprehensible and reasonable, morally stable young people, capable of and rejoicing in achievement, leave our institutions filled with a strong will to creative action'.⁴⁶ For those considered to be incapable or ineducable, however, no such support would be forthcoming.

⁴² See, for example, the 1938 and 1942 Education Ministry Richtlinien; also the 'Landeslehrplan für die Hilfsschulen Sachsens'.

⁴³ 'Hat die Heilpädagogik noch Berechtigung?'; see also more detailed statistics given in W. Jung, 'Neugeordnete Hilfsschule', *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 Apr. 1942. For a particularly extreme example of this kind of cost-benefit analysis, see Tornow, 'Die Hilfsschule eine Sonderschule'.

⁴⁴ R. Jänecke, 'Die neue Hilfsschule', *Wohlfahrtswoche*, 2 Aug. 1942; for similar sentiments, see NSLB Wuppertal report, Anlage 2, 'Sonderschule und Körperertüchtigung', BArch, NS 12/842; Karl Tornow, *Denken Sie nur. Unser Fritz soll in die Hilfsschule!* (Munich, 1944), pp. 22-3.

⁴⁵ 'Richtlinien für die Gestaltung der Hilfs- und Sonderschulen in Preußen', BArch, R 4901/3266a, Bl. 236ff.

⁴⁶ 'Tätigkeitsbericht für das 1. Vierteljahr 1937 - Gaufachgruppenleiter für Taubstummen- und Sprachheillehrer', 24 Mar. 1937, BArch, NS 12/842.

III

Educational practice at the Third Reich's most prominent elite boarding schools, on the other hand, looked very different. The NPEA took pupils from the age of ten, with the aim of turning them into leaders in all walks of life – whether military, political, or intellectual. The schools were open to aspirants of any background; in fact, they offered a generous scheme of free or heavily subsidized places, which also played a key part in their propaganda, since the schools deliberately aimed to foster talented children from poorer backgrounds, particularly the sons of workers and farmers. Nevertheless, it seems that middle-class children still predominated.⁴⁷ As we shall see, prospective pupils were subjected to a rigorous and gruelling selection process, which not only tested their supposed level of 'racial purity' and their academic abilities, but also placed extreme emphasis on physical prowess and sheer courage. Those who successfully passed all aspects of the selection examination would then join their Napola's first 'platoon' (*Zug* – class), learning to live in a highly militarized and enclosed boarding-school community. The schools provided an extensive variety of activities: academic lessons, though taken seriously, took a back seat compared with physical education, which included the opportunity to ride, glide, sail, drive, and ski, as well as engagement in pre-military training, such as small-bore shooting and cross-country wargames. Pupils also had the chance to visit many European countries (as the Reich's 'cultural ambassadors'), and to take part in exchanges with British public schools and American academies. In addition, older boys spent extended periods working in factories, in mines, or on German farms in the conquered eastern territories – in order to understand the lives of 'the people', whom they would one day rule in peace and lead in war. Needless to say, the Napolas were also hothouses for the propagation of Nazi ideology, and countless former pupils died on the battlefields of the Second World War.

Due to the extremely rigorous and racialized selection process, the Napolas' seductive glamour, their *schöner Schein*, was arguably even more attractive because the student body was supposedly so 'racially exclusive'; hence, Napola pupils could foster a more marked sense of superiority, relative not just to social outcasts but also to members of the local Hitler Youth, or even pupils from other types of elite school. Thus, the denizens of the Napolas can be seen as a type of 'hyperselective' or '*auserlesene*' *Volksgemeinschaft*, representing very many of the ideals prioritized in the National Socialist ideal of the *Volksgemeinschaft* – racial, physical, political – but in microcosm. Traits such as 'racial purity', sporting capacity, strength and (relative) physical perfection, political uniformity, and, above all, the will to ever greater achievement (*Leistung*), which were demanded of National Socialist society in general, could be found at the NPEA in particularly refined and exaggerated form. The quality and range of the equipment and facilities with which every Napola was provided as a matter of course far outstripped anything that 'normal' secondary schools could provide, and this, along with the exacting

⁴⁷ See Helen Roche, *The Third Reich's elite schools: a history of the Napolas* (Oxford, 2021).

selection process, ensured that pupils at the Napolas could almost always outperform their civilian counterparts in contexts such as sporting competitions.

At first glance, the aims and ethos of the NPEA might appear radically different from those of the *Hilfsschulen*, given their explicit mission to winnow out the very best of German youth and train them as the Nazi leaders of the future. For instance, while the ‘special schools’ were deliberately allocated as small a fraction of state funding as possible, the Napola system enjoyed an abundance of state-of-the-art resources and extremely high levels of financial investment, with the Prussian Finance Minister Johannes Popitz even complaining to Rust in 1936 that the twelve Napolas currently in existence cost 325 per cent more to maintain than all of the remaining 350 state secondary schools (*höhere Schulen*) in Prussia.⁴⁸ While the cost of a ‘special school’ education was seen as an injurious burden to the state, which former pupils would have to recoup as a matter of course once they had managed to obtain gainful employment, the cost of education at a Napola was heavily subsidized, especially for children from working-class families.⁴⁹ A particularly favoured conceit in this regard was the idea that the ‘spirit of socialism’ ruled supreme at the Napolas. As the Inspector of the NPEA, August Heißmeyer, stated in an interview with the Reich Youth Press Service in September 1936, ‘It would be a betrayal of National Socialism if we were to make the education of our future leaders a question of wealth or pedigree.’⁵⁰

Moreover, while pupils who had attended the *Hilfsschulen* would only be allowed to take on a job at all if they had been deemed to meet the state’s eugenic requirements, Napola graduates were given privileged access to careers in all walks of life; they were being groomed as ‘new blood for the most significant leadership positions’, as the head of the SS racial office put it in 1942.⁵¹ To this end, the NPEA Inspectorate routinely made arrangements with bodies such as the Reich Student Affairs Office (*Reichsstudentenwerk*) that less well-off pupils at the Napolas would be put forward for their funding streams without having to participate in the special courses which all other applicants were expected to undergo, and pupils were also given especially detailed careers advice, both by the *Reichsstudentenwerk* and by the SS Central Office (*SS-Hauptamt*). In addition, pupils who exhibited particular potential for and interest in the diplomatic service would be automatically

⁴⁸ Popitz to Rust, 30 June 1936, BArch, R 2/28072. In 1934, the schools’ annual budget had been sufficient to allow NPEA Plön to spend 2,000 RM purely on cross-country wargames – see Kleint, ‘An das Finanzministerium. Betr. Aufbau der Staatlichen Nationalpolitischen Erziehungsanstalt (Rudolf-Schröter-Schule) in Klotzsch’, Aug. 1934, Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Dresden, 11125, Nr. 21354, Bl. 327–9.

⁴⁹ For more on this, see Roche, *Elite schools*, introduction; also Helen Roche, ‘Schulische Erziehung und Entbürgerlichung’, in Norbert Frei, ed., *Wie bürgerlich war der Nationalsozialismus?* (Göttingen, 2018), pp. 154–72.

⁵⁰ K. G. Walberg, ‘Die Nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalt’, *Reichsjugendpressediens*, 8 Sept. 1936, BArch, NS 5/VI/18840.

⁵¹ ‘Nachwuchs für die bedeutendsten Führerlaufbahnen’: Standartenführer Bruno K. Schultz, Chef des Rassenamtes, to all RuS-Führer, SS-Hauptamt, Ergänzungsamt, Hauptabteilung, Eignungsprüfer, and Hilfseignungsprüfer, 5 Nov. 1942, BArch, NS 47/40.

put forward as candidates for the Foreign Office's fast-track course, as well as being presented to Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop in person at their graduation.⁵²

However, a closer examination of the Napola selection process suggests that both types of institution, the 'elite' schools and the 'special' schools, were fundamentally responding to the same underlying eugenic and biopolitical anxieties when it came to their selection processes and their constant scrutiny of the student body (both literal and metaphorical). Indeed, detailed analysis of reports on the pre-selection tests and entrance examinations from many of the NPEA suggests that the various categories of physical, mental, and sensory impairment mentioned above, including epilepsy and visual and auditory 'deficiencies', also mapped onto the matrix of reasons which were commonly given for excluding children from the Napola selection process.⁵³

Even prior to receiving an invitation to the Napolas' week-long entrance examination (*Aufnahmepfprüfung*), pupils who had been pre-registered by their primary schools as potential applicants – with or without their parents' consent – would undergo a 'pre-selection evaluation' (*Vormusterung*) by the NPEA authorities.⁵⁴ This usually included a medical examination by a qualified doctor, arranged in collaboration with the local health authority (*Gesundheitsamt*).⁵⁵ Although candidates' academic abilities were also taken into consideration, and prospective Napola pupils were supposed to possess above-average intelligence as a matter of course, a negative result in the physical examination would necessarily result in immediate elimination from the selection process. For instance, reports from NPEA Bensberg and NPEA

⁵² Letter, 4 Feb. 1939, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Vienna (ÖStA), BEA 49; agreements dated 26 Jan. 1939 and 31 Jan. 1939, Staatsarchiv Ludwigsburg (StAL), E 202 Bü 1747; *Der Jungmann. Feldpostbericht der NPEA Oranienstein*, 9th Kriegsnummer [late 1942/early 1943], p. 86.

⁵³ For a detailed account of the NPEA selection process, see Roche, *Elite schools*, ch. 2, which synthesizes a variety of rich archival material from German federal state archives, including the Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Wiesbaden; the Hessisches Staatsarchiv Darmstadt; the Landeshauptarchiv Sachsen-Anhalt, Abteilung Magdeburg; the Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen, Abteilung Westfalen, Münster; the Niedersächsisches Landesarchiv, Hauptstaatsarchiv Hannover (NLA-HStAH); and the Niedersächsisches Landesarchiv, Staatsarchiv Oldenburg.

⁵⁴ See e.g. NLA-HStAH, Hann. 180 Lüneburg Acc. 3/88 Nr. 26. On parents not being informed that their children were being considered for the selection process, see Holthoff, 'Anhang: warum soll die Meldung der Jungen durch die Erzieher ohne jede Rücksicht auf die Eltern und deren Pläne erfolgen? Warum sollen die Eltern von der Meldung nicht in Kenntnis gesetzt werden?', in the same file.

⁵⁵ On collaboration with local *Gesundheitsämter*, see e.g. letter, 6 Sept. 1944, Staatsarchiv Hamburg (StAH), 3361–2 VI Nr. 604. On the importance of the *Gesundheitsämter* more generally in implementing Nazi racial and biological policies, including forced sterilizations and 'euthanasia', see e.g. Johannes Vossen, 'Das nationalsozialistische Gesundheitsamt und die Durchführung der "Erb- und Rassenpflege": staatliches und kommunales Gesundheitswesen im Vergleich', in Wolfgang Woelk and Jörg Vögele, eds., *Geschichte der Gesundheitspolitik in Deutschland. Von der Weimarer Republik bis in die Frühgeschichte der 'doppelten Staatsgründung'* (Berlin, 2002), pp. 165–84; Johannes Donhauser, *Das Gesundheitsamt im Nationalsozialismus. Der Wahn vom 'gesunden Volkskörper' und seine tödlichen Folgen. Eine Dokumentation* (Stuttgart, 2007); also Astrid Ley, *Zwangsterilisation und Ärzteschaft. Hintergründe und Ziele ärztlichen Handelns 1934–1945* (Frankfurt am Main, 2004).

Oranienstein in 1940 listed the most common reasons for rejection at the pre-selection stage as skeletal deformities of various kinds, flat feet or turned-in ankles, cardiac defects and heart murmurs, and strongly impaired hearing or vision, as well as any tendency towards obesity.⁵⁶

Candidates who made it so far as to be selected for the *Aufnahmeprüfung* itself would, along with their families, be subjected to even more intense biopolitical scrutiny. Those applicants who had not been submitted for pre-selection by their primary schools, but who had had their applications sent in by parents or guardians instead, would need to send in proof of their family's biological fitness, including that of their parents, siblings, aunts, and uncles.⁵⁷ Candidates further had to provide their 'certificate of Aryan identity' (*Ariernachweis*), proving that they possessed no Jewish relatives in the last three generations. Even the presence on the family tree of supposedly Jewish-sounding surnames such as 'Knoblauch' or 'Erlenwein' could lead to suspicions that the candidates were unsuitable for further consideration, unless hard evidence to the contrary were supplied.⁵⁸

This requirement forced prospective pupils and their families to perform the process which Peter Fritzsche has tellingly termed 'racial grooming', seeking out proof of their biological pedigree in accordance with the dictates of Nazi 'racial science'.⁵⁹ Thus, Manfred Klotz, a former pupil of NPEA Klotzsche in Saxony, recalled that he found the puzzle of proving that his relatives had been 'Aryan' back to the year 1800 fascinating, including writing to relevant parishes to receive copies of his ancestors' birth, christening, and marriage certificates. However, Klotz was allegedly taken aback to find a shoemaker named 'Samuel Mende' among his mid-nineteenth-century antecedents, since he opined that this was 'not a common name in Protestant circles'.⁶⁰ The necessary research might even continue beyond pupils' initial acceptance at an NPEA if the requisite documentation could not be supplied beforehand. For example, a special issue of the NPEA Köslin school newsletter from February 1934 contained articles which gave pupils detailed advice on how to lay out their family trees, and which hymned the virtues of this kind of racialized 'family research' or *Sippenforschung*.⁶¹ Meanwhile, one pupil at NPEA Bensberg wrote anxiously to his mother in September 1942:

⁵⁶ Report by Kemper, 25 Apr. 1940, NLA-HStAH, Hann. 180 Lüneburg Acc. 3/88 Nr. 26; NPEA Oranienstein, report, 15 Apr. 1941, Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen, Abteilung Westfalen, Münster, Regierung Arnsberg, Nr. 31780.

⁵⁷ See e.g. Hans-Joachim Männig, 'Schulpforta: NPEA im Krieg', *Die Pforte. Schulpforta-Nachrichten. Zeitschrift des Pfortner Bundes e.V.*, 51 (1998), pp. 15–19.

⁵⁸ BArch, NS 2/134, Bl. 25.

⁵⁹ Peter Fritzsche, *Life and death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), ch. 2.

⁶⁰ Manfred Klotz, *Trotzdem groß geworden! Jugenderfahrungen eines kleinen Mannes* (Norderstedt, 2000), p. 101. For further examples of this kind of 'racial grooming', see (from Helen Roche's personal archive) Manfred F., private correspondence, 4 Sept. 2011; Peter K., *A Prussian goldminer's tale: from childhood, through boyhood to manhood and marriage* (2013), p. 5; Hans Lindenberg, *Montagskind. Erinnerungen*, vol. 1 (1990), p. 39. Also Hans Günther Zempel, *Des Teufels Kadett. Napola-Schüler von 1936 bis 1943. Gespräch mit einem Freund* (Frankfurt am Main, 2000), p. 43.

⁶¹ 'Sinn und Zweck der Familienforschung' and 'Wie stelle ich meine Ahnentafel auf', *Die Brücke. Nachrichten von der Nationalpolitischen Erziehungsanstalt Köslin*, 6, nos. 7–8 (Feb. 1934), pp. 133–8.

I can understand why things haven't been going very quickly with the ancestry certificate, since Uncle Otto first had to seek out all of the papers. But I can't understand why Father hasn't sorted it out. Ask Uncle to write me a note as well on how far we go back (on both sides of the family).⁶²

In a report on the selection process at NPEA Ballenstedt from April 1944, Hundertschaftsführer Otto Brenner described the misgivings with which assessors at the Napolas might greet gaps in a candidate's documentation, or hints which might suggest that he or his family were biologically 'unfit'. Brenner stressed that it was imperative that the local health authorities should send on candidates' family dossiers (*Sippenakten*) as expeditiously as possible, in order for the school to carry out its 'hereditary biological survey' (*erbbiologische Bestandsaufnahme*) of all the applicants efficiently.⁶³ It was deemed unhelpful in the extreme when medical professionals included such ambiguous remarks in their assessments as 'suitable [for acceptance at an NPEA] without any great reservations' (*ohne große Bedenken geeignet*). Rather, they should make hard-and-fast negative decisions immediately in cases where, for example, the candidate's grandfather had been an epileptic, or where a pupil evidently had significantly impaired vision even when wearing spectacles.⁶⁴ Brenner also remarked that any hereditary diseases in a candidate's family history, or 'asocial' behaviour in other members of the family, as well as physical problems which had not been immediately obvious when the pupils in question were observed during their sports training, would give rise to instant rejection.⁶⁵

From 1936 onwards, the 'medical' and 'racial' elements of the selection (*Auslese*) which prospective pupils had to undergo became ever more intertwined, as the NPEA Inspectorate under SS-Obergruppenführer August Heißmeyer sanctioned the increasing involvement of the SS Race and Resettlement Head Office (RuSHA) in the process.⁶⁶ Specially trained 'racial experts' would attend the entrance examination (and, in some cases, the pre-selection tests) and, by 1941, any child who failed their 'racial examination' would be immediately excluded from further consideration, even if they otherwise had a clean bill of health.⁶⁷ The racial criteria used in these examinations accorded with broader selection criteria used by the SS as a whole; their integration into the process formed a crucial part of Heinrich Himmler's bid to turn the NPEA into exclusive SS training schools, which would provide his

⁶² Bensberg *Jungmann* to his mother, 13 Sept. 1942, Stadtarchiv Bergisch Gladbach, R 4/29/1.

⁶³ Brenner, 'Erfahrungsbericht, zusammengestellt von Hundertschaftsführer Brenner [NPEA Ballenstedt]. Betr: Jungmänner-Auslese', Apr. 1944, Landeshauptarchiv Sachsen-Anhalt, Abteilung Magdeburg, Rep. C 28 II, Nr. 2361, Bl. 130–7).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Bl. 133.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Bl. 132.

⁶⁶ See Roche, *Elite schools*, ch. 1.

⁶⁷ See BArch, NS 2/134, Bl. 23–9; BArch, NS 2/68, Bl. 93–5; BArch, NS 47/40; BArch, R 187/270b, Bl. 122; letter from Calliebe, 5 Jan. 1939, ÖStA, BEA 51; letter from SS-Führer im Rasse- und Siedlungswesen im SS-Oberabschnitt Südwest, 25 Apr. 1939, Staatsarchiv Sigmaringen, Wü 66/12 T 3 Nr. 13.

organization with a constant supply of fresh recruits who already conformed to SS racial standards.⁶⁸

The entrance examination itself then brought an even more intense scrutiny of prospective pupils' bodies. Parents were encouraged to accompany their children to the examination, not primarily in order to give them a sense of the school's atmosphere and a chance to meet some of the teachers, but so that the headmaster and his staff could gain an impression of the candidate 'as a member of his clan' (*als Glied seiner Sippe*), judging the social and biological qualities of the family as a whole.⁶⁹ The ensuing week-long process included further medical and racial tests, but candidates were also constantly under observation during the packed programme of academic lessons, physical education, cross-country wargames, and extracurricular activities, as well as during their free time. Throughout the process, the staff and older pupils who were assisting with the examination would take note of the prospective pupils' 'racial type', along with their talents and temperament.⁷⁰

At the subsequent staff meetings at which decisions were made regarding the candidates' suitability, lists of the applicants were circulated which identified and catalogued their potential biological defects (minor ones this time, since any applicants exhibiting major health concerns had already been excluded). These might include swelling of the glands, poor teeth, postural problems which could easily be corrected, and nasal problems which could lead to mouth-breathing or snoring.⁷¹ The candidates were also graded according to physical and racial criteria, with a score of five indicating that their 'bodily construction' was 'sufficient', and a score of six to seven indicating that it was 'good', while the letters 'b' and 'c' corresponded to the racial categories 'predominantly Nordic, Falic' and 'Mediterranean or harmonious crossbreed' respectively. Finally, a score of A2, A3, or A3+ corresponded to an overall impression that the candidate was 'good', 'satisfactory', or 'fully satisfactory' in 'attitude, gesture, and appearance'. A final summary of the candidate's overall fitness was indicated by a combination of the three codes, so that, for example, '5 b A3 (?)' meant that the overall physical and racial categorization was satisfactory, but that certain concerns had been raised during the medical examination.⁷² Any grave reservations regarding physical or biological fitness could still lead to rejection at this stage, however advanced the prospective pupil's other talents and abilities. Prior to their final acceptance, all successful candidates had to supply full medical

⁶⁸ Roche, *Elite schools*, ch. 1. On SS selection criteria more generally, see Bastian Hein, *Elite für Volk und Führer? Die Allgemeine SS und ihre Mitglieder 1925–1945* (Munich, 2012); Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler* (Oxford, 2012).

⁶⁹ 'Aufnahmeprüfung an den Nationalpolitischen Erziehungsanstalten', *Weltanschauung und Schule*, 1, no. 5 (1937), pp. 300–3.

⁷⁰ See e.g. Friedrich Dubsloff, 'Probewochen 1943', *Mitteilungen der Nationalpolitischen Erziehungsanstalt Naumburg/Saale*, 16th and 17th Kriegsnummer (July/Sept. 1943), pp. 14–17; see also 'Erlebnisse und Erfahrungen während der Probewochen (Aus Aufsätzen des Zuges 4a)', in *ibid.*, pp. 21–2.

⁷¹ 'Extraaanlage zu "Tagesbefehlen" 1939, Nachlass Zgf. Kurt B. (1906–1979), ab 1936 NPEA Oranienstein', Privatarchiv Adolf Morlang.

⁷² *Ibid.*

certification from a doctor that they – and their immediate family – were ‘fit for an NPEA’ in terms of their overall health and heredity.⁷³

Although this preternatural emphasis on physical fitness might have been partially explained by the fact that the Napola authorities needed to be sure that their pupils could keep up with the high demands placed upon them by the schools’ gruelling physical education and pre-military training programme, this was never the whole story.⁷⁴ Ultimately, the NPEA needed a guarantee not only that their pupils were completely physically and mentally fit, but also that they were ‘biologically sound’ and eugenically beyond reproach.

Even after they had finally been accepted at an NPEA, pupils were still subject to constant scrutiny by staff and medical professionals, not just for the six-month trial period (known as the *Probetalbjahr*), but for the entirety of their school careers. If they did not achieve enough, or display sufficient mental or physical maturity, or if they were suspected of developing unfavourable racial or biological traits, pupils would be asked to leave and transferred to a civilian school; it was expected that the attrition rate in each class would be at least five pupils each year for the first five years which they spent at the school.⁷⁵ In a letter dated 29 April 1939, Reinhold Gräter, the headmaster of NPEA Backnang in Württemberg, noted in this regard that, even though it was necessary to make it as easy as possible to get rid of unsuitable boys during the probation period, it might often only become obvious over the course of the next few years that they were unsuited to the school’s demands. Gräter suggested that racial theory should therefore be used to illuminate pupils’ true nature and analyse their character development, in line with the RuSHA guidelines; those who allegedly stemmed from an ‘unharmonious’ mixture of races would be unlikely to demonstrate stable character development. Harping on his own brand of biological determinism, Gräter claimed that, in his own experience, pupils with physical problems or deformities of any kind sooner or later displayed malformations in their character as well:

I could name a number of [pupils] who were a heavy burden to the school or who brought no honour to it after they had left, but whom I am convinced could have been determined to be unsuitable if they had been subjected to a genuine racial observation and evaluation.⁷⁶

⁷³ For an example of the exhaustive form which doctors had to fill out in this regard, including the so-called ‘Sippentafel’, see *Ministerial-Blatt des Reichs- und Preußischen Ministeriums des Innern*, Ausgabe Nr. 12, 23 Mar. 1937, StAH, 352–3 Nr. II U 54-175.

⁷⁴ For a detailed account of sport and pre-military training at the NPEA, see Roche, *Elite schools*, ch. 2; also Helen Roche, ‘Sport, Leibeserziehung und vormilitärische Ausbildung in den Nationalpolitischen Erziehungsanstalten: eine “radikale” Revolution der körperlichen Bildung im Rahmen der NS-“Gesamterziehung”’, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus*, 32 (2016), pp. 173–96.

⁷⁵ ‘Erläuterungen zu dem Muster eines Kassenanschlages für eine Nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalt’, BArch, R 2/19991; ‘Raumprogramm für die Neubauten der Nationalpolitischen Erziehungsanstalten mit grundständigem Zug’, BArch, R 2/12711.

⁷⁶ Gräter to Ministerialabteilung für höheren Schulen, Stuttgart, 29 Apr. 1939, StAL, E 202 Bü 1747.

Small wonder, then, that pupils at the NPEA, who were also frequently subjected to racial testing during their academic lessons in ‘racial theory’ or biology, should be palpably relieved when it was revealed that they belonged to an ‘acceptable’ mixture of races, according to the Nazi racial hierarchy.⁷⁷ Such tests might include pupils having their heads measured with callipers to find the longest and widest skulls in the class; relevant observations would then be noted according to the Nazi racial ideologue Hans F. K. Günther’s craniometric principles, in an attempt to determine the racial ‘index’ of each year group.⁷⁸

Interestingly, on at least one occasion, in November 1936, NPEA Plön also collaborated with the NSLB’s local *Fachschaft* V chapter in hosting school visits, followed by a workshop at which similarities between the Napolas and the *Hilfsschulen* were discussed in detail. This featured presentations such as ‘The training and education plan at the school in Plön and applications which are revealed for our own work’, ‘The school in Plön [and] racial selection’, ‘The personality of the educator (a comparison: Plön and us)’, and ‘Training through manual activities at Plön and with us’. Around 160 members of the group attended.⁷⁹

As the Third Reich’s future leaders, Napola pupils were encouraged to support and even abet the regime’s policies of sterilization and annihilation of the ‘hereditarily unfit’; they might be taken on tours of mental hospitals and asylums to facilitate their indoctrination with the idea that such drastic measures were entirely necessary. For example, in the February 1939 issue of the NPEA Köslin school newsletter, a pupil named Winter waxed lyrical on the amazing dedication of the nurses and doctors whom he had seen at work at the Kükenmühle asylum in Stettin, but ultimately concluded that anyone who had seen the sorry state of the asylum’s inmates could scarcely fail to agree with the measures that the National Socialist state was taking ‘to lessen and hinder this misery’.⁸⁰ Later, during the war years, at least two newly founded Napolas (Reichenau, and Rufach in occupied Alsace) benefited from the expropriation of former mental asylums whose patients had been summarily murdered as part of the Nazi regime’s T4 ‘euthanasia’ programme.⁸¹

IV

In a heart-rendingly matter-of-fact entry in his NPEA Schulpforta ‘class diary’, dated 4 October 1944, the roughly thirteen-year-old Hans-Martin Steinert

⁷⁷ See e.g. Reinhard Wagner, *Mehr sein als scheinen. Vier Jahre Jungmann in der NPEA Rottweil* (Ditzingen, 1998), p. 111.

⁷⁸ See e.g. ‘Schädelmessungen’, *Die Brücke*, 7, no. 1 (Apr./May 1934), pp. 3–4.

⁷⁹ Gau Hamburg report, 6 Jan. 1937, BArch, NS 12/842.

⁸⁰ Winter, ‘Kükenmühle’, *Die Brücke*, 11, no. 4/5 (Feb. 1939), p. 70. A concluding editorial comment coyly noted that readers might be interested to learn that Winter intended to pursue a career as a naval medic.

⁸¹ On the foundation of NPEA in former asylums, see Roche, *Elite schools*, ch. 10; also Arnulf Moser, *Die Napola Reichenau. Von der Heil- und Pflegeanstalt zur nationalsozialistischen Eliteerziehung (1941–1945)* (Konstanz, 1997); Gérard Leser et al., *Rouffach. De l’asile au centre hospitalier. 90 ans de psychiatrie* (Strasbourg, 1999).

described the impact of the Napolas' constant policy of negative selection as follows:

Today I'm writing for the last time ... in our class diary. Nine or ten days ago I was told by *Hauptzugführer* Rommel that my father had de-registered me from this school ... because my physical and intellectual achievements did not fulfil the expected demands. I must make my peace with this and, after I have given back all my property which belongs to the school, I will journey home early next morning ... It isn't at all easy for me to leave. Hopefully I will still be able to make something 'useful' of myself at a Gymnasium! (*Hoffentlich werde ich auch auf einem Gymnasium etwas 'brauchbares'!*)⁸²

Despite their ostensibly exalted position within the Third Reich's racial hierarchy, Napola pupils could no more avoid being subjected to the regime's biopolitical calculus than could their counterparts at the *Hilfsschulen*. They were constantly being assessed by school staff, the SS, and the Wehrmacht in terms of their 'usefulness' as 'human material' – even if they were intended to serve as officer-rank cannon-fodder, rather than as quasi-indentured labourers performing menial jobs. Both the NPEA and the *Hilfsschulen* put constant pressure on their pupils to display sufficient 'achievement' (*Leistung*) and to prove themselves, seeking to control them and segregate them in the name of the greater good of the body politic. From this perspective, we can easily situate the 'special schools' and the 'elite schools' on the same spectrum, which, at its most radical and destructive, encompassed both the Third Reich's compulsory sterilization law and the T4 'euthanasia' programme. Just because the NPEA pupils represented the most prized hothouse blooms nurtured by the Nazi 'gardening state' did not make them any less susceptible to its 'weeding' – it was merely that the consequences of this process were far less severe, and almost never lethal.

The Nazified concept of the 'hereditary inventory' (*erbbiologische Bestandsaufnahme*) – more readily associated with the destruction of the inhabitants of mental asylums and psychiatric hospitals, or the selection of supposedly 'Germanic' settlers and inhabitants of the occupied territories by the SS during the Second World War (which could lead both to the extermination of those deemed undesirable, and to the racially motivated kidnapping of those deemed to possess suitably 'German' blood) – was applied just as strictly at the NPEA as at the *Hilfsschulen*.⁸³ This was the fundamental mechanism

⁸² Jochen Männig et al., eds., *Das Tagebuch. Aufzeichnungen des 2. Zuges der N.P.E.A. Schulpforta 1943–1945* (1997), p. 40 (from Helen Roche's personal archive). On SS descriptions of weakened concentration-camp prisoners as 'bodily deficient human material', see Hördler, 'Disintegration of the racial basis', p. 488.

⁸³ See Peter Sandner, 'Planwirtschaft und Krankenmord', in Hedwig and Petter, eds., *Auslese der Starken*, pp. 105–15; Ines Hopfer, *Geraubte Identität. Die gewaltsame 'Eindeutschung' von polnischen Kindern in der NS-Zeit* (Vienna, 2010); Maria Fiebrandt, *Auslese für die Siedlergesellschaft. Die Einbeziehung Volksdeutscher in die NS-Erbgesundheitspolitik im Kontext der Umsiedlungen, 1939–1945* (Göttingen, 2014); Schulte, 'Die "Euthanasie"-Tötungsanstalt Hadamar', pp. 133–5; Helen Roche,

which lay behind the Nazi dream of a biologically flawless society: an ever-repeated process of internal, neo-Darwinist selection which Esposito has likened to an autoimmune illness, in which the protective apparatus of the 'body politic' became so aggressive that it turned against its own body, in a desperate and potentially fatal attempt to avoid at all costs 'the contagion of superior beings by those who are inferior'.⁸⁴ Hence, there existed a curious paradox between the doctrine of egalitarianism which the National Socialist state preached to its 'Aryan' citizens, and the growing biosocial elitism which it simultaneously sought to foster.⁸⁵ Ultimately, as Bishop von Galen intimated in his sermons inveighing against the 'T4' killings, universal application of this form of biopolitical calculus would inevitably lead to the slaughter of German 'national comrades' (*Volksgenossen*), if they were too damaged by war, age, or other infirmity to contribute to society in a 'productive' fashion any longer.⁸⁶

Overall, this article has made three primary interventions. Firstly, it has supported and broadened the application of the findings of other recent analyses of the Third Reich's biopolitics, which suggest that socio-economic and racial-biological motivations were inextricably intertwined (rather than opposed) within the context of Nazi social welfare and extermination policies. Social diagnostics, educability, and the ability to work effectively in one's prescribed role were paramount when it came to selection for life, death, and promotion in the regime's hierarchy, rather than 'racial purity' alone.⁸⁷

Secondly, it has demonstrated the value of considering the twin poles of 'positive' *Auslese* and 'negative' *Ausmerze* in tandem, not only within the spheres of fertility and reproduction, but also in social and educational terms.⁸⁸ Within the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*, mechanisms of integration and

'Herrschaft durch Schulung: the Nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalten im Osten and the Third Reich's Germanising mission', in Burkhard Olschowsky and Ingo Loose, eds., *Nationalsozialismus und Regionalbewusstsein im östlichen Europa. Ideologie, Machtausbau, Beharrung* (Berlin, 2016), pp. 127–51.

⁸⁴ Esposito, *Bíos*, p. 116.

⁸⁵ See Hutton, *Race and the Third Reich*, pp. 13–15; Frank Bajohr and Michael Wildt, eds., *Volksgemeinschaft. Neue Forschungen zur Gesellschaft des Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 2009), p. 17; Nicole Kramer and Armin Nolzen, 'Einleitung', in Nicole Kramer and Armin Nolzen, eds., *Ungleichheiten im 'Dritten Reich'. Semantiken, Praktiken, Erfahrungen* (Göttingen, 2012), pp. 9–26; Rüdiger Hachtmann, "'Volksgemeinschaftliche Dienstleister'?" Anmerkungen zu Selbstverständnis und Funktion der Deutschen Arbeitsfront und der NS-Gemeinschaft "Kraft durch Freude", in Detlef Schmiechen-Ackermann, ed., *'Volksgemeinschaft'. Mythos, wirkungsmächtige soziale Verheißung oder soziale Realität im 'Dritten Reich'?* (Paderborn, 2012), pp. 111–31; and Rüdiger Hachtmann, 'Social spaces of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* in the making: functional elites and club networking', in Martina Steber and Bernhard Gotto, eds., *Visions of community in Nazi Germany: social engineering and private lives* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 200–14.

⁸⁶ On this, see Nathan Stoltzfus, *Hitler's compromises: coercion and consensus in Nazi Germany* (New Haven, CT, 2016), pp. 174–206.

⁸⁷ See Czech, 'Nazi medical crimes'; Hördler, 'Disintegration of the racial basis'.

⁸⁸ On such consideration as a scholarly desideratum, see Kramer and Nolzen, 'Einleitung'; Finger, *Eigensinn im Einheitsstaat*, p. 24, n. 18; Stefan Schnurr and Sven Steinacker, 'Soziale Arbeit im Nationalsozialismus: Auslese und Ausmerze im Dienste der Volkspflege', in Horn and Link, eds., *Erziehungsverhältnisse im Nationalsozialismus*, pp. 253–73.

exclusion carried equal weight, mutually reinforcing each other, and creating what Uwe Kaminsky has termed a thorough-going ‘biologization of the social’.⁸⁹ An analysis of the educational discourses and imperatives of these two frequently overlooked institutions – which represent the two ends of the spectrum of Nazi biopolitical policy in education – shows that state attitudes towards the *Hilfsschulen* and the NPEA epitomized the regime’s twin imperatives of selection and eradication, thereby shedding fresh light on Nazi state’s dystopian ambitions for the realization of the biologically irreproachable *Volksgemeinschaft* as a whole.

Finally, when discussing eugenics in the broadest sense of the word, as a ‘biologically based movement for social reform’, or ‘a “modern” way of talking about social problems in biologising terms’, we have shown that educational institutions can be fruitfully analysed as crucial sites of biopolitical intervention and social engineering.⁹⁰ After all, as Edward Ross Dickinson has pointed out, ‘pedagogy is always rooted in an explicit or implicit ideal of the kind of people and thus the kind of society it aims to create’.⁹¹ Therefore, when discussing the biopolitical ambitions not only of the Nazi regime, but also of other regimes, in other periods, the educational interventions and pedagogical praxis of those states should be treated with the utmost seriousness.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

⁸⁹ Uwe Kaminsky, ‘Eugenik als Sozialutopie und Gesellschaftspolitik’, in Hedwig and Petter, eds., *Auslese der Starken*, pp. 13–25; see also Habbo Knoch, ‘Gemeinschaften im Nationalsozialismus vor Ort’, in Dietmar von Reeken and Malte Thießen, eds., ‘*Volksgemeinschaft*’ als soziale Praxis. *Neue Forschungen zur NS-Gesellschaft vor Ort* (Paderborn, 2013), pp. 37–50.

⁹⁰ Tanner, ‘Eugenics’, p. 460; Dikötter, ‘Race culture’, pp. 467–8. For similarly broad definitions of eugenics as social praxis, see Turda, *Modernism and eugenics*, and Ross Dickinson, ‘Biopolitics’.

⁹¹ Ross Dickinson, *Politics of German child welfare*, p. 3.

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