FACING HISTORY AND OURSELVES

Handout

Education in the Weimar Republic

Directions: As you are reading, annotate the text by completing the following steps:

1. Circle words that are unfamiliar.
2. Put a question mark (?) in the margin in places where you feel confused.
3. Answer the questions that follow the text.

In the Weimar Republic, Germany's schools remained centres of tradition. Most teachers were conservative, both in their way of teaching and in their politics, and many were anti-socialist and antisemitic. A young man known as Klaus describes his schooling in the 1920s:

> We were taught history as a series of facts. We had to learn dates, names, places of battles. Periods during which Germany won wars were emphasised. Periods during which Germany lost wars were sloughed over. We heard very little about World War I, except that the Versailles peace treaty was a disgrace, which someday, in some vague way, would be rectified. In my school, one of the best in Berlin, there were three courses in Greek and Roman history, four in medieval history, and not one in government. If we tried to relate ideas we got from literature or history to current events, our teachers changed the subject.
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> I really don't believe that anyone was deliberately trying to evade politics. Those teachers really seemed to think that what went on in the Greek and Roman Empires was more important than what was happening on the streets of Berlin and Munich. They considered any attempt to bring up current political questions a distraction . . . because we hadn't done our homework.
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> And there was always a great deal of homework in a school like mine, which prepared students for the university. At the end of our senior year, we were expected to take a detailed and exceedingly tough exam called the Abitur. How we did on the exam could determine our whole future. Again, the Abitur concentrated on our knowledge of facts, not on interpretation or on the expression of personal ideas.[1]

1. Record the title, and write a brief summary (three or four sentences) of this reading.

2. What kind of education do you think would best prepare students to be citizens in a democracy? Do you think the education Klaus describes would prepare students for participation in a democracy? Explain your thinking.

1 Ellen Switzer, *How Democracy Failed* (New York: Atheneum, 1977), 62–63. Reproduced by permission from Curtis Brown, Ltd.

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