

James Kennedy

'Adolf Hitler's plans for America are no secret in his schools. Every young Nazi is taught to hate the U.S., knows that some day he will have to fight it. The prime aim of Nazi education to fire Germans with zeal to give up their lives for Adolf Hitler.' This conclusion is from a TIME Magazine's November 1941 review (at a time when the United States was not yet formally at war with Germany) of Gregor Ziemer's best-selling *Education for Death*, written by an American who had spent years as a schoolteacher in Germany. Later, Walt Disney would use Ziemer's book as inspiration for a 1943 film by the same title, which shows how young German boys are brainwashed to hate the weak and fight for Adolf Hitler. Ziemer himself concluded in 1941:

If we are to combat the spirit of German youth with our own spirit of Democracy, it will have to be ... a spirit as fiery in its concentration as Nazism is in German schools. . . . Hitler is making fanatics. We should at least make believers. . . . Young Germany is awake and ready to die. Let young America and its parents, its instructors, and advisers be awake and ready to live.
(<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,772777,00.html>)

Ziemer's assessment of Nazi motivations may lack the depth of later analyses. But in some ways, the themes that Ziemer sound familiar in an America (and the Western world) fighting 'the war on terror:' mobilizing resistance against an enemy through depictions of a ruthless foe that hates us, plans violence against us and is ready to pay the ultimate sacrifice to destroy us.

That Americans (and others) tend to use the terms of 1941 for the challenges they face in the early twenty-first century may not be a recipe for wisdom in a world that in many respects very different from that of 1941 and with opponents of liberal democracy whose means and aims that are also very different. Moreover, one might add, Ziemer was not looking at terrorists, in contrast to the focus this afternoon. But Ziemer's book raises perennial questions that are also central to our discussions today.

It raises the question of how and why people can be 'educated for death,' or how people make the step from shared ideals to participating in violence. Answering that question involves looking at history and the wide range of particular circumstances that have led to become terrorists, and trying to make sense of these historical examples. Are there historical lessons we can learn? It also makes use of social scientific insights to further reflect on patterns that encourage groups or individuals to engage in violence against others. Some of the ostensible causes of terrorist activity – such as personality tendencies or disorders – may turn out to be contested explanations, requiring further debate. There is still a great deal we don't know about how pedagogy, upbringing and the development of individuals play a role in the formation of ideals that might lead to violence, and to their choice to sacrifice their talents to a violent aim. The question of why people, and in particular idealists, turn to violence is a pressing question to societies (and in particular to policy makers) anxious to prevent such an outcome.

In the second place, Ziemer is also interested in a positive response to the violence he saw in the Nazis – let the young and their parents, instructors and advisors be awake and ready to live. That certainly may be interpreted to mean a kind of watchfulness by those involved in education or social work against the young who might feel tempted to turn their ideals into violence.

But it can also be more broadly interpreted to think about how Dutch society, or Western society, might be a more fully inclusive democracy, not interested only the repression of violence but in its peaceful prevention, by the just and fruitful harnessing of ideals that might otherwise be used in less pacific ways . What that might mean must be a part of any broader discussion about future policy.

That ties in with the third and last point I want to make, a point that Ziemer does not really help us with: the not always clear boundaries between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' ideals, and between justified and unjustified forms of rebellion – perhaps even violence.

Ziemer saw an absolute moral binary: between the death-dealing anti-values of Nazism and the ideals of democracy. We may not have that luxury of that absolute moral certainty. It is true that every democracy must ultimately take a stand against forces that threaten to destroy it. But every reflective democratic society will think about whether – in the name of quelling violence – important ideals are being silenced, and whether our legitimate need for security undermines important ideals of our own. The chances of doing both too little and too much in our efforts to prevent further terrorism are pretty great.

But it cannot hurt to reflect further on the boundaries of idealism and when violence becomes the way to achieve one's most cherished aims.