The SUMO Speaker Series for Undergraduates

Thursday, April 2

4:15-5:05, Room 380C

(Food Provided)

Mathematics Education under the Nazis

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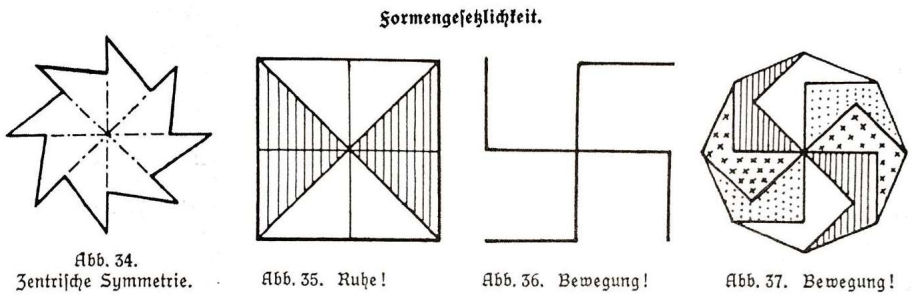

Abstract

When Hitler became chancellor of the German Republic in 1933, mathematicians knew they had a problem – Nazi ideology, anti-intellectual in the extreme, had little use for most sciences outside of biology and medicine. In this talk, I seek to delineate and assess the ways in which math education became a vehicle for Nazi propaganda. I argue that mathematicians did not merely conform to an ideology imposed from above, but eagerly Nazified both the form and content of their discipline in a multi-pronged effort. At the most superficial level, authors and textbook publishers changed word problems to reflect the new priorities of the Nazi regime. Attempts to construct a singularly German history of mathematics also arose in textbooks and other publications of the era. Finally, many pedagogues claimed that the German soul required a specific type of mathematical training. These thinkers asserted that Germans, with their irrational and intuitive natures, had a propensity for the spatially grounded field of geometry. Drawing on a philosophical tradition originating in Kant's epistemology, they argued that geometry must be taught as the foundation of mathematics. We trace the reasons behind the propagandistic instrumentalization of mathematics under the Nazis and the means by which it was carried out. In so doing, we obtain a richer understanding of the Nazis' own epistemologies and the imprint that ideological dictatorships can leave on even ostensibly objective disciplines.

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