Book Reviews

Roche, Helen. The Third Reich's Elite Schools: A History of Napolas. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2022. ISBN: 9780198726128. pp. 544. $125.00 hardback.

Under its totalitarian rule, the Nazi state underwent a process of *Gleichschaltung*: a coordination of all aspects of society to integrate German political and cultural life behind Nazi ideology and racial policy. Many of these efforts targeted German youth to ensure that these processes would take root for generations to come. One tool of this process, boarding schools called the National Political Educations Institutes (NPEA, known popularly as Napolas) aimed at educating the next generation of Nazi elite. Founded in the first year of Nazi rule, the Napolas schools implemented a system of "total education" to train "racially suitable" future leaders of the Reich, which positioned these institutions, and their pupils, at the forefront of broader efforts at ideological education and indoctrination (2). Despite this significant role, scholars have omitted a comprehensive examination of the Napolas school system and its pupils. Helen Roche's *The Third Reich's Elite Schools* addresses this gap. Her resulting work also offers essential contributions to a wide breadth of subfields.

The Napolas system, which would include over forty schools across the Reich by war's end, aimed at training boys over the age of ten from varied backgrounds, and eventually girls, into future leaders of the German *Volksgemeinschaft*. Its leaders integrated formal learning with socio-political training to create a vanguard cadre in constructing the National Socialist ideal. Modeled on pedagogical elements from Prussian cadet schools and British public-school systems infused with Nazi racial ideology, these institutions provided a National Socialist education within a militarized enclosed community. Each prided itself on physical education and emphasized pre-military training, offered cultural exchanges and mission-like exchange programs, and in the process served as "instruments of the Nazi state," with aims and principles "steeped in the tenets of Nazism" (17).

Roche's study endeavors to tell the comprehensive story of these institutions from their inception to their legacy. This task is particularly significant since, according to Roche, the limited existing body of scholarship on the subject is outdated at best and, problematically, a victim of the very obfuscated views of the institutions' Nazi past facilitated by its alumni in the postwar. She highlights institutional trajectories and everyday lives of the wide spectrum of pupils who attended these institutions. Her scholarship treats the history of education as contemporary history itself, since "the history of an era, a regime, or a dictatorship can indeed be written through the medium of the history of education or the history of childhood and youth," thus treating *Bildungsgeschichte* (the history of education) as not just *Zeitgeschichte* (contemporary history), but *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life) (8). To

accomplish this sizable task, Roche's work employs an original synthesis of primary sources "from eighty archives in half a dozen countries worldwide," including correspondence from school administrations and outside ministries, school newsletters, and private documents of instructors and pupils (5). More significant, however, is her masterful use of eyewitness testimonies collected from over a hundred former pupils. This treasure trove of material admirably provides an unmatched glimpse into everyday school life and the multifarious political projects and training regimens employed within these institutions, and intimately personalizes the subject.

This considerable venture unfolds in three parts. "Genesis" introduces the Napolas schools at their inception, traces their administrative development, and situates them in the broader landscape of Nazi mechanisms, while revealing bureaucratic competition between other institutions. This part offers a glimpse into the everyday life of Napolas pupils through their own perspectives. Roche unravels the schools' rigorous selection process, daily routines and lessons, and special occasions, including "missions" into German society and to Anglo-American public schools, all unfolding within the institution's Nazified agenda. Part 2, "Variety within Unity," explores different schools as case studies to showcase the degree of systemic variation within the full range of Napolas institutions. Roche interrogates the "Napolization" of former Prussian cadet schools who balanced traditional martial pasts with national socialist visions mobilizing this past for propagandistic purposes, divergent trajectories of Austrian Napolas schools, the role of Napolas schools in the Third Reich's racist colonial projects, and, in the work's most intriguing chapter, the curricula and contested nature of Napolas for Girls. Part 3, "Nemesis," explores the demise of the Napolas schools, first revealing disruptive effects of total war on daily operations (from resource scarcity to institutional engagement with Nazi atrocity), and then recounting facilities' evacuations and last stands through war's end. Roche concludes by synthesizing the legacies of the Napolas schools and of their former pupils constructing and leveraging a usable past from their Napolas lives in the immediate and long postwar.

These parts provide readers with a comprehensive chronology of the Napolas schools in the broader *Volksgemeinschaft*. The sheer scale of this undertaking and breadth of sources used to accomplish it are impressive, and the author's deft writing is accessible to field experts and amateurs alike. Her integration of oral history is particularly noteworthy, offering a personal touch to her subject often missing in archive-centric accounts. The book's greatest virtue, however, comes from its contributions to scholars of the Third Reich. Roche's book posits that Napolas schools function as a "fascinating microcosm" of the broader *Volksgemeinschaft* "in which many of the Third Reich's most fundamental tendencies can be found in magnified form," in no small part due to the school's full immersion and socialization within the total education of National Socialist ideals (5). Each chapter concludes with a section situating its case study in broader

debates in Third Reich scholarship. Throughout the book, Roche comments on scholarly arguments ranging from polycratic infighting between Nazi institutions, the complex relationship between the Nazi state's core and periphery, the regime's complicated and self-serving relationship to a martial Prussian past, a precarious parallel situation of gender politics within the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the contours of the Nazi idealized racial *Volksgemeinschaft* and its new European order, Nazi colonial ambitions and mechanisms, the deterioration of German society under total war, and the German search for a usable past and creation of collective memory in the wake of participation in Nazi atrocity.

This book succeeds not only in its goal of unearthing the story of Napolas, but also in complicating many larger ongoing conversations in Third Reich scholarship, including questions of gender, memory, empire, institutions, and violence. Essential for anyone looking to gain even a glimpse into a newly documented device of Nazi indoctrination and society, Roche's book offers much to a wide range of scholarship and should likewise facilitate further research into these schools and their pupils.

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