

Helen Roche

*The Third Reich's Elite Schools: A History of the Napolas*

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Helen Roche makes some very grand claims about the subject of her recent book, *The Third Reich's Elite Schools: A History of the Napolas*. The National Political Education Institutes (NPEA, or Napolas)—boarding schools for Nazi Germany's future elites—were, she suggests, a microcosm of the Third Reich itself: they were “a petri-dish in which many of the Third Reich's most fundamental tendencies can be found in magnified form” (5) and a “prism through which many key aspects of Nazism are refracted” (7). Understanding the Napola school system, she essentially argues, will bring greater understanding of Nazi Germany. While historians of the Third Reich commonly make the case that our narrowly defined, niche topics can shed new light on the Hitler dictatorship, Roche's introductory statements about the significance of these schools, the role of which she admits very few are “fully aware,” initially seemed somewhat exaggerated (2). Yet, Roche ably and repeatedly proves her point throughout a book which extends more than 500 pages. This is an incredibly detailed, richly described, and meticulously researched book contribution to the education history of Nazi Germany. It also convincingly reveals how these institutes realized “many of the ‘aspirations of the dictatorship’” (7), particularly its indoctrination efforts—turning young Germans into Nazis—as well as the creation of positive, lived experiences of the Nazis' promised *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community). Roche's work will also resonate with readers of this journal, who are already aware of the history of education's potential for illuminating contemporary history and everyday history more generally.

Roche's book offers the first comprehensive history of the NPEA boarding schools for those German students meant to become the political and social elites of the Third Reich. Intended for racially “pure” boys (and later girls) from the age of ten, these forty-odd schools spanned the “Old Reich” and Nazi-occupied Europe by the end of the Second World War. A word like “comprehensive” does not, however, capture just how detailed and expansive this study is. The source material Roche drew upon is mind-bogglingly varied and extensive. (She cites eighty archives in six different countries; she also gathered over one hundred testimonies from eyewitnesses, most of them former Napola pupils.) Much of the limited, and now very dated, previous scholarship on these institutes was written by former students themselves. Roche's position as an “outsider” (albeit with personal experience of girls' boarding schools in Britain) allows her a new, welcome vantage point (vii).

The book has twelve chapters divided into three sections. “Genesis” sets up the antecedents of, and pedagogical influences on, the Napola system, ranging from continuities with pre-National Socialist educational traditions to British public schools. Here Roche also outlines the racial selection criteria by which students were chosen to attend and describes the intake process. What makes that chapter (“‘Selection’, Teaching, and Everyday Life”) so fascinating is Roche's commitment to a “thick

description” approach to convey how students, parents, teachers, and administrators experienced that process (59). Former students, like Peter K. for example, recall having to prove “Aryan” ancestry. We know this task was inflicted by authorities from above in all spheres of Nazi society, but we rarely hear from below about the responses to it and the feelings about it.

The next six chapters form a section entitled “Variety within Unity,” the basic premise of which is that the Napola schools were not carbon copies of one another and continued to maintain their idiosyncrasies, despite the wishes of leading administrators who hoped for a kind of Napolization to occur. Roche pays so much detailed attention to the differences—for example between a school established as part of the Germanizing mission in occupied Eastern Europe, a former Catholic school near Hanover and institutes for girls—that it distracts somewhat from her overall argument: the Nazi regime’s centralizing aims were largely realized here, she maintains, and greater homogeneity was achieved.

The final section, “Nemesis,” examines the effects of total war on the schools and the Napola students. Roche’s method of “thick description” is particularly effective here in recovering the stories of the final chaotic, terror-filled months of the war from the students’ perspective. Those same students told consistently exculpatory stories after the war ended, arguing that Napolas were normal schools. Very few seemed to recognize how thoroughly politicized their education under the swastika had been. The final chapter, “Epilogue: Post-war,” explores the development of a Napola “memory culture” (395), which so deeply—and problematically—influenced previous scholarship on these schools before Roche’s excellent study.

Roche is very keen to show how the Napolas connect to wider currents in Third Reich history. Thus, she concludes each chapter by explicitly articulating those connections (e.g., how the NPEA for girls mirrored “prevailing trends in policy towards women and girls under National Socialism” [323]). These passages might be useful for the non-specialist, but they become somewhat repetitive and unnecessary given just how well Roche has usually made that point earlier in the chapter. The constant evocation of the value of studying the Napolas, while certainly convincing, makes the book feel more like a collection of separate essays, with each one attempting to stand on its own. Nonetheless, the conclusions to each chapter fulfill Roche’s intention of embedding this educational history within the wider contexts of Third Reich history. The Napolas do indeed reveal the basic mechanics of the Hitler dictatorship writ small. *The Third Reich’s Elite Schools* thus reminds us how enlightening and important the history of education can be.

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