

**Helen Roche.** *The Third Reich's Elite Schools: A History of the Napolas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Illustrations. 544 pp. \$115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-872612-8.

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## Mueller on Roche, *The Third Reich's Elite Schools*

The National Political Education Institutes (NPEA, or Napolas) were boarding schools for the Third Reich's future elite. Founded on the occasion of Adolf Hitler's birthday in 1933, the Napolas represented the National Socialist regime's most consequential experiment in the realm of education. As institutes of "total education" and extreme microcosms of the Nazi racial community, these schools spread from the Prussian heartland into all corners of Nazi-occupied Europe, and immersed boys (and later girls) of impeccable "Aryan" qualities from the age of ten and upward in a curriculum that amalgamated pedagogical elements from antiquity, Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany, the British public school system, and, of course, Nazi racial ideology. By the end of the Second World War, over forty Napolas had opened their doors to thousands of aspiring leaders of the Nazi New Order—many of whom struggled for decades after the collapse of the Third Reich to make sense of their youths as Nazi elite school pupils.

Despite the fact that the Napolas were a "bellwether for a series of Nazified educational innovations which subsequently would have been put into practice throughout the German secondary-school system as a whole" (p. 421) and "lay at the

forefront of many political and socio-cultural developments under National Socialism" (p. 6), a comprehensive history spanning their antecedents, function under the swastika, and postwar legacy has not been written. Dr. Helen Roche, a Cambridge-educated classicist and associate professor of modern European cultural history at Durham University, has now accomplished this arduous feat with her study *The Third Reich's Elite Schools*, published by Oxford University Press.

The enigmatic role of the Napolas both during the Nazi dictatorship and in the historiography of Nazi Germany since (more on this later) forced Roche to pursue a research program that can only be admired for its thoroughness, range, and ingenuity. Over the course of a decade, Roche pieced together the scattered mosaic that is the history of the Napolas by amassing primary source materials from eighty archives across Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The indisputable highlight and cornerstone of Roche's study is her oral history project, which saw her elicit over a hundred eyewitness testimonies from former Napolas pupils. It is through these first-person accounts that *The Third Reich's Elite Schools* attains a level of detail and color, and contemporary relevance, that documentary research alone could

never hope to replicate. The advantage of this methodological approach, which future scholars of Nazi elite education will, unfortunately, have to make do without, shows its full potential in chapter 11, where Roche relies on eyewitness testimony to document the travails of Napola pupils during the final months of the war, including a harrowing and ill-fated seaborne evacuation attempt.

The scale of Roche's research enterprise is appropriate, indeed necessary, when considering the breadth of her ambitions. *The Third Reich's Elite Schools* is no ordinary institutional history: this much Roche makes plain to her readers at the very outset of her 543-page tour de force. In the first place, she aims to produce the first comprehensive history of a school system whose very limited extant scholarship has, in some cases, been adversely influenced and delayed by the obfuscatory efforts of former Nazi elite school pupils, who sought to conceal their educational histories and that of their schools.[1] More significantly, Roche is eager to rescue educational history from the margins and to demonstrate that "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" (p. 8). For Roche, the Napolas serve as a useful prism through which the very nature of the Third Reich can be elucidated. In what amounts to a bit of an overuse of German-language nomenclature throughout the book, even for this native German reviewer, Roche hopes to provide a model for future scholarship on how to effectively treat *Bildungsgeschichte* (the history of education) as *Zeitgeschichte* (contemporary history) and *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life).

*The Third Reich's Elite Schools* seeks to accomplish these aims—to illuminate school life at the Napolas in greater detail than any previously existing study, and to push educational history into the mainstream of historical inquiry—by following a tripartite structure, comprising a total of

twelve chapters, bookended by an introduction and conclusion. The three opening chapters of part 1, "Genesis," are designed to equip readers with a firm understanding of the schools' place in the Third Reich's educational landscape, their institutional development and administration, and scenes of everyday life. Readers will be particularly intrigued by chapters 2 and 3's experiential accounts of the Napolas' rigorous selection process of "racially suitable" prospective pupils, and the indoctrinatory effects of a Napola curriculum through its multifarious extracurricular activities.

Part 2, "Variety within Unity," contains six chapters and serves to illuminate the, in some instances, significant regional, pedagogical, and even religious differences that existed within the Napola school system. Many of the case studies—exploring, among others, the Prussian Napolas' cadet school and *Stabila* origins, the influence of humanistic traditions at venerable boarding institutions such as Schulpforta, or the varying Germanizing objectives of Napolas and *Reichsschulen* in eastern and eastern Europe—summarize aptly, albeit sometimes too briefly, Roche's many excellent stand-alone articles on the intricate Napola universe, as well as her first book (*Sparta's German Children*, 2013). While Roche makes clear that these aspects of differentiation were gradually eroded as the process of centralization and "Napolization" unfolded, the re-emergence of the schools' particularistic characteristics in the exculpatory tales of former Napola staff and students during denazification (and arguably ever since) buttresses her claim that an authoritative account cannot "lump all of the Napolas together indiscriminately" (p. 5).

Part 3, "Nemesis," contains, according to this reviewer's admittedly partisan interests, some of the book's most valuable sections. The three concluding chapters detail, in chronological sequence, first, the disruptive effects of "total war" on the schools, followed by an equally gripping account of the final months of the Second World War, dur-

ing which school life disintegrated into total chaos and an “all-pervasive atmosphere of instability” took hold (p. 358). In chapter 12, Roche transitions from scenes of war, destruction, and human tragedy to a glimpse into the experiences and machinations of former Napola staff and pupils during the immediate postwar period, across the Divided Germanys, and into the present day. A particular highlight of this section is Roche’s exploration of Napola alumni’s “strategies of exculpation” (p. 399) and their efforts to construct a “non-incriminating and sufficiently ‘usable’” past (p. 396) in response to criminal prosecution (read: denazification) and damning depictions in popular media and the published secondary literature.

It would be an understatement to say that *The Third Reich’s Elite Schools* attempts to cover a lot of ground. To show just how important the Napolas can be to our understanding of the rise and fall of the Third Reich, Roche engages with an impressive range of historiographical genres and perspectives: from transnational history, regional history, women’s history, and the history of religious persecution and colonial domination to “key debates concerning the nature of the *Volksgemeinschaft*” (p. 10). Whether it is realistic or even feasible for Roche’s study—or any study—to authoritatively contribute to all these disciplinary domains within the confines of a single volume is sure to provoke a spirited debate among more pedantic-minded academics at a post-conference dinner table in the near future. From the viewpoint of this reviewer, Roche has managed what very few historians of institutional or organizational studies are able to do: she has successfully embedded the historical trajectory of an understudied system of Nazi elite schools in the wider currents of German and European history, employing a balanced and empathetic analytic approach, crystal-clear prose, and easy-to-follow expository structure. Her work is therefore guaranteed to appeal to a wide and varied readership

and hopefully attract other historians to this vital scholarly arena.

For specialists of Nazi Germany, *The Third Reich’s Elite Schools* will hold particular interest because of its recurring themes of “the Third Reich’s most fundamental tendencies,” including polycratic infighting between the Education Ministry, the SS, and various military branches; conflicts between the center and periphery of the Nazi state; Nazism’s complicated and opportunistic relationship with the past; gender politics and the leadership roles of women (see, in particular, chapter 9 on the most “obscure” and “least well-understood” (p. 312) aspect of the Napola system, the Napolas for Girls); and the realization, in miniature, of a hyper-selective racial community, both within the borders of the *Altreich* and Hitler’s short-lived European empire (pp. 5-6). What is more, Roche’s careful and largely corroborative use of eyewitness testimonies throughout her monograph offers a valuable lesson to students and experts alike on how to navigate the potential pitfalls of collective memory.

While the book can at times feel like an edited collection in which Roche plays the role of both editor and author, whatever hindrances to the flow of narrative some readers might detect are more than compensated for by the sheer breadth and depth of her investigation. *The Third Reich’s Elite Schools* is written with a keen eye for the modern reader. Though academic audiences will continue to gain the greatest benefit by reading the book from cover to cover, casual readers may approach the subject in a more piecemeal fashion and select only those case studies they find especially fascinating—without having to fear being dropped into intellectual no-man’s-land. The only lingering concern, at present, is caused by neither the structure nor the contents of the book, but rather by its outrageously expensive price tag. Roche has done her part to push educational history into the mainstream; now others have to do theirs.

## Note

[1]. See Horst Ueberhorst, *Elite für die Diktatur. Die Nationalpolitischen Erziehungsanstalten 1933-1945: Ein Dokumentarbericht* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1969); and Harald Scholtz, *NS-Ausleseschulen: Internatsschulen als Herrschaftsmittel des Führerstaates* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1973).

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