In *The Third Reich’s Elite Schools: A History of the Napolas*, historian Helen Roche analyzes a lesser-known part of Nazi Germany’s regime: elite preparatory schools designed to train the Reich’s future elite. The Nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalt (National Political Education Institutes, NPEA), known informally as Napolas, established in 1933 and dissolved in 1945, combined the foundational model of English boarding schools with a National Socialist twist. This educational system was distinct and isolated from other institutions of the Third Reich. Roche’s interest in this area of history stems from the fact that information surrounding it is sorely out of date and biased. As a result, she has undertaken the effort to create a new foundational work on the topic.

An associate professor of history at Durham University and an associate fellow at Durham’s Institute of Advanced Study, Roche holds a BA, MPhil, and PhD, all from the University of Cambridge. She has done extensive research into twentieth-century German schooling. Her research interests are largely centered on Europe, specifically nineteenth-century Germany, fascism in Europe, and classical reception.[1] These interests come to the forefront of the work under review as Roche narrows her focus to how the fascist nature of the Napolas affected the youth who were enrolled in these schools.

Roche’s goal in writing this book was to update and recast the history of the Napolas. Moreover, she uses the Napolas as a microcosm for acquiring a greater understanding of the Third Reich. Roche arrives at a less biased understanding of the Napolas than illustrated in previous scholarship while also showing the broader ideals of the Third Reich as exemplified by this educational system. She, for example, highlights how the Napolas mimicked the conflicts between other Nazi institutions, such as the SS and Wehrmacht, which competed to use the Napolas as their own recruiting grounds, and how Nazi racial doctrines factored in the admission process. Roche’s analysis is thorough and sound.

To argue her points, Roche marshals multiple types of evidence. She not only uses eyewitness accounts through personal correspondence with some students who attended the Napolas but also draws on eighty archives from various countries, namely, Germany, Austria, England, Ireland, and the United States, that have records of their interactions with the Napolas during exchange programs. In addition to this primary source and ethnographic research, Roche consulted German periodicals, other published primary sources, and numerous secondary sources in multiple languages that stretch back to the 1960s. Roche divides her work into three sections. Part 1, “Genes-
“Nemesis,” deals with the foundation of the Napolas and everyday life. Part 2, “Variety within Unity,” handles individual Napolas and their unique situations within the educational system. Finally, part 3, “Nemesis,” deals with the Napolas during and after the Second World War. Not only does this organization provide a stable framework for her analysis of the material, but it also allows researchers and students to quickly flip to the section they want to read.

Roche’s work is designed to be used by fellow researchers and historians studying the Third Reich, especially undergraduate and graduate students, as it provides a good starting point for both undergraduate research and more advanced lines of inquiry needed for graduate studies. Its extensive end of chapter notes, where she elaborates on her points further, allow for such inquiries to be pursued. While it is accessible for those who do not have much of a historical background in Nazi Germany, it does assume a baseline of knowledge that can make it somewhat difficult to understand the material at first. Yet such baseline knowledge and jargon used by Roche are mitigated by a writing style that is both informative and easy to follow. She explains new terminology when it appears and includes a helpful glossary at the back. She also provides a list of images—such as scenes of everyday life at the Napolas and maps to orient the readers—at the beginning of the work. These additions, paired with the organization of the book, make it so that readers are not overwhelmed when using the work.

Overall, Roche’s book is a fine work of scholarship that deals with a subject that needs serious revision. She successfully distills her vast amounts of research into an easily consumable volume that is an asset to any historian studying the Third Reich. Moreover, Roche’s book is friendly to all levels of academics, which will ensure its longevity as it will not be confined to the upper circles of academia but instead will be diffused to all levels of the university educated.

Note
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