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**Elisabeth Meilhammer**

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# Non-aligned Popular Education versus National Socialism: The Decline of the Thuringian Folk High School 1930 - 1933

Elisabeth Meilhammer

The end of the First World War meant two things for Germany: a deep and more or less all pervading feeling of crisis, and, arising from this, a sense of a new awakening. Both could be seen clearly in the field of education, and especially in adult education. In 1919, for the first time in German history, a democratic constitution came into force, and in this constitution, for the first time as well, the furthering of adult education was made a duty of the state.<sup>1</sup> According to article 148, all institutions of education were directed towards the furthering of moral education, of citizenship, of personal and vocational ability in the spirit of the German national character and of the reconciliation of nations,<sup>2</sup> and the feelings of dissenters were to be respected.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the principles of tolerance, of international reconciliation and of national identity through education were operative.

The politically and denominationally unfettered adult education movement - called 'Folk High School' - regarded itself as bound by this constitutional mandate, and in the years after 1919 it flowered particularly in the state of Thuringia. Its ideal was an education that was directed to the entire human being, to furthering all those 'growing up and grown up',<sup>4</sup> independent of their political creed, denomination, sex or social origin, in a high quality and unpatronising manner. To this ideal there was matched on the organisational level the principle of democratic self-government of the Folk High School, and on the didactic level the principle of neutrality. This meant that the Folk High School considered itself as a school and not as an instrument of party politics. It was intended as a forum of untrammelled communication where each opinion was to be listened to, but where no opinion was to be the officially predominant one, and where recognising human rights was the inviolable basis of the work.<sup>5</sup>

Two interconnected points seem to me essential in upholding such a programme: the ability to withstand attacks from the political left and right, and the secure financing of the organisational apparatus. In what follows I will try to show that in both respects, beginning in 1930, the Thuringian Association of Folk High Schools, the Folk High School Thuringia, was increasingly unable to keep up its programme, until with the accession to power of National Socialism and the ensuing Nazi co-ordination of all educational institutions, there was a total downfall of non-aligned popular education in Thuringia. My main aim is to determine the factors that contributed to the fact that already by 26 April 1933, three months after the Nazis came to power in Germany, non-aligned adult

education was rendered completely ineffectual, four months before the political co-ordination of all Folk High Schools in the German Reich was ordered by official decree. How was it that the downfall of a free and democratic organisation, the Folk High School, that for fourteen years had seemed to be stable and had reached large parts of the population, could happen so quickly?

On December 8, 1929 - shortly after the crash in the New York stock market - there was a state parliament election in Thuringia. The result was that the political balance of power in Thuringia shifted to the extent that the National Socialist German Workers' Party - NSDAP - gained 11.3% of the vote.<sup>6</sup> Because the block of the bourgeois parties refused to co-operate with the Social Democrats and the Communists, the National Socialists were allowed to participate in the new Thuringian state government. This opportunity - exploiting the crucial position of the NSDAP for a stable government in Thuringia - was pursued by Adolf Hitler in person. In our context, the most important fact is that Hitler succeeded in his demand to have Wilhelm Frick - a 'fanatical national socialist' (Hitler's own words) - who was a convicted participant in the November Putsch of 1923 - occupy the post of Ministry of the Interior and of Education.

Hitler's decision in favour of Frick was not accidental, but was supposed to serve as a signal for the systematic 'nationalisation' of education, as Hitler confessed in a personal letter to an overseas supporter.<sup>7</sup> What was meant by this became immediately apparent: Firstly, without delay, in March 1930, Frick cancelled all governmental funds for the Folk High School Thuringia, with the excuse that the critical financial situation of the state made this measure unavoidable, whereas he retained complete financial support for the three nationalistically oriented institutions of adult education in Thuringia.<sup>8</sup> Note that the work of the Folk High School Thuringia had essentially been financed by governmental means. Secondly, Frick removed from active duty the two most prominent exponents of non-aligned adult education in Thuringia, namely its managing secretary, the governmental office holder and responsible editor of the *Pages of the Thuringian Folk High School*, Reinhard Buchwald, and Eduard Weitsch, the director of the Residential Folk High School Dreißigacker and editor of the respected journal *Freie Volksbildung*.

This was a great shock to the Folk High School Thuringia. However, its proponents did not believe that the National Socialists would stay in power much longer. The optimistic - and false! - confidence that National Socialism would only be a short interlude in Thuringia is apparent in the treatment of the sudden existential crisis that had befallen the Folk High School.

To the Folk High School Thuringia it seemed important to represent its own positions in public, and in such a manner as to extol the successes of non-aligned democratic adult education; to strengthen its supporters and to convince the public by objective information of the success of the chosen route, including

statistics, but at the same time the Folk High School shied away from an open confrontation with National Socialism.

At that time, indeed, they could not know just how inhuman National Socialism would prove to be. In the adult education movement of the Weimar period the slogan 'education of the nation is national education' was current; if nationalistic circles hoped that a regenerating effect for the people, producing national identity, would issue from an allegedly timeless model of Germanness in education<sup>9</sup> then, it seemed at the time, this did not necessarily have to lead to the horrors that were later to take place in the name of National Socialism.

From the statements of the Folk High School Thuringia one can see the effort put in to mobilise all forces to withstand the cultural politics of the Nazis, without mentioning National Socialism directly by name and certainly without steering a course of confrontation.

Besides the struggle for continuation in spirit there was the struggle for financial survival. The population of Thuringia was asked for a contribution to continue the work of non-aligned adult education. The German Association of Folk High Schools [the *Reichsverband der deutschen Volkshochschulen*] was brought into play, the support of deputies of the state parliament was won as well as the benevolent energy of a liberal: the responsible official in the Ministry of Education; these combined efforts made it, after all, possible for the Folk High School to obtain money for its 1930 budget. This success was attributed by the educationists of the Folk High School Thuringia to their joint struggle against the cancellation of governmental funds.<sup>10</sup>

The National Socialist danger was by no means overcome by this success. It was a grave misjudgement to simply take for granted a unified opposition against National Socialism in the circles of the Folk High School. This is shown by what happened in the small town of Arnstadt.

Since 1929 the relationship between the Folk High School Thuringia and Social Democracy was troubled, and the tensions could not be dissipated in 1930 but were further aggravated so that in Arnstadt all Social Democratic members withdrew from the Folk High School Thuringia, and all workers were called upon to leave the association and to boycott its meetings. Because of this, the Folk High School Thuringia was weakened on the local level, and this circumstance was taken advantage of by the National Socialists. They on their part became members of the Folk High School of Arnstadt in large numbers, demanded a general assembly, carried a vote of no confidence against the board of directors and on October 23, 1930, elected a new board of directors with a committed National Socialist as chairman. The decline of non-aligned adult education in Arnstadt began, as became immediately apparent by the declaration of the new chairman. In particular, he repudiated the first paragraph of the statutes of the Folk High School Arnstadt. That was worded as follows:

The Folk High School Arnstadt...is a society which...in the spirit of free science and pure humanity intends to effect for all countrymen a renewal and heightening of intellectual and spiritual social life, without party-political or denominational influence.<sup>11</sup>

The new chairman took issue with this 'on the grounds that humanity is nothing to him, national conviction everything'.<sup>12</sup> The first paragraph of the statutes of the Folk High School Arnstadt was changed, and its new wording was as follows:

The Folk High School Arnstadt...is a society which...intends to convey knowledge to the German citizen in an easily comprehensible manner, with the aim of increasing and furthering in him the love of Germanness and the recognition of the necessity of a German folk-community.<sup>13</sup>

This amounted, in effect, to the secession of the Folk High School Arnstadt from the Folk High School Thuringia. Internally, the Association reacted with alarm - but externally with silence. The principle of neutrality in adult education was taken to be tolerance - of everybody, even of the enemies of tolerance.

The Folk High School of Thuringia attempted in three ways to confront its concerns:

- by intensifying the discussion on non-aligned and neutral adult education as well as on topical problems (for example, to the education of the jobless or of women)
- by extolling the successes that had been gained by educational work in the spirit of the Folk High School
- by changing the statutes of the Association, now obliging all associated Folk High Schools to outlaw in all their meetings and organised events any propaganda for political parties or ideological groups, and providing that non-compliance with this principle should lead to the exclusion of the Folk High School. But no Folk High School led by National Socialists was in fact excluded from the Association, nor was membership of the NSDAP declared to be a reason for such exclusion.

At that time, the Folk High School Thuringia believed it had overcome the crisis, encouraged by the fact that the National Socialist minister of Education, Frick, was deposed by a vote of no confidence on 1 April 1931, and also by the fact that an official agreement was reached with the *Reich*-committee for Socialistic educational work that amounted to an endorsement of the Folk High School by the Democratic Socialists.<sup>14</sup> The managing secretary of the Folk High School of Thuringia, Heiner Lotze, wrote in June 1932 'The German Folk High School movement has survived this time of distress because it is life itself'.<sup>15</sup>

This was an illusion. In Thuringia there was a small-scale anticipation of the 1933 accession to power of the National Socialists. On 31 July 1932, there was a state parliament election in Thuringia. The result was devastating: 42.5% of the vote fell to the NSDAP, which became the strongest group by far in the state parliament and in consequence occupied all five ministries after the election.<sup>16</sup> The former teacher Fritz Wächtler became Minister of Education.

Wächtler continued the attack on independent folk-education. Firstly, he dismissed the governmental official responsible for popular education, Dr Bergner, who had been on friendly terms with the chairmen of the Folk High School Thuringia and who had engaged himself in many respects on its behalf.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, Wächtler demanded another change in the statutes of the Folk High School Thuringia, so that the Ministry of Education, as the fund-giving corporation, was to be allowed to put *two* representatives *with* the right to vote on the board of directors of the Folk High School Thuringia, instead of *one* representative *without* the right to vote, as it had been previously.<sup>18</sup> Wächtler again operated with the threat of cancellation of all funds.<sup>19</sup> Under these circumstances the Folk High School Thuringia saw no choice but to agree to his demand.<sup>20</sup> And again we have a misconception of the true situation: during the hurriedly summoned general assembly of members, the board of directors made no objection to Wächtler.

From the state parliament elections of July 1932 onwards, the strategy of the Folk High School Thuringia for obtaining government funds can be compared to dancing on a rope. In October 1932, the chairman of the Association, the Jena professor Constantin von Dietze, and its managing secretary Heiner Lotze had a meeting with the National Socialist Minister of Education Wächtler.<sup>21</sup> He demanded the Folk High School should become a nationalistically oriented institution, and not exclusive of party interest.<sup>22</sup> The two proponents of the Folk High School Thuringia did not agree; they argued that it was the purpose of the Folk High School to work for the whole German people as a German Folk High School, that it was contrary to the principle of neutral Folk High School work to provide politically one-sided education.<sup>23</sup> Never would they have moved away from the principle of neutrality, that means non-alignment, tolerance and pluralism of values.<sup>24</sup> But during the meeting, Wächtler stated that no financial support was to be forthcoming, for example, for the discussion of the anti-war novel by the Jewish writer Erich Maria Remarque 'All Quiet on the Western Front'. The two proponents of the Folk High School protested 'that the book was merely to be discussed as an example, and *was to be rejected*, not recommended'<sup>25</sup> - an objection the minister did not accept. If the Folk High School wanted money from the state, it had to renounce certain themes and subjects. Thus, it is obvious that the financial dependence of the Folk High School Thuringia on governmental funding led to a loss of ideological independence.

To sum up: the reasons for the decline of the Folk High School of Thuringia are related to two unfavourable external conditions, firstly that the National Socialists enjoyed support among the Thuringian people, they were elected to the state parliament, and from 1930 held ministerial posts in the state government where they sought to block non-aligned adult education, and secondly, from 1930 the economic crisis in Germany was aggravated to such an extent that financial resources became very scarce. But besides these external factors there are other reasons for the downfall of the Folk High School Thuringia. The most important one is that there was no strong and unified opposition against the National Socialists. Those who were not Nazis in Thuringian education disagreed among themselves. Moreover, the representatives of the Folk High School Thuringia adhered to a misguided notion of neutrality, and did not recognise the inhuman character of National Socialism. In addition, they depended on governmental support - a fact that crucially weakened their potential for making public criticism.

On 30 January 1933, the National Socialists came to power in the German *Reich*: Hitler became Chancellor. This meant the downfall of independent popular education: the entire board of directors of the Folk High School of Thuringia was replaced by National Socialists, all Folk High Schools became politically co-ordinated, and even the name of the organisation was changed, into 'German Homeland School', in order to stress its attachment to blood and soil and homeland.<sup>26</sup> The implications of this can be gathered from the following lines in the journal of the former Folk High School of Thuringia: 'Even if individuals have to make sacrifices, even if one or the other will go to the devil in the great work of construction, it does not matter! All that matters is that the German people shall live! The individual is nothing, the people is everything!'<sup>27</sup> Both the language and content of this quotation show that with the downfall of non-aligned popular education in Thuringia there had also occurred a complete loss of democratic, liberal and humane spirit in adult education.

## References

1. Thus the constitution of 1919: 'The education of the people, including the Folk High Schools, should be furthered by the Reich, by the states, and by the communities' (Die Verfassung des Deutschen Reichs 1919, article 148, paragraph 4.
2. *ibid*, paragraph 1.
3. *ibid*, paragraph 2.
4. Thus the formula used by the chairman of the Folk High School of Thuringia, school supervisor Alfred Benda (and also used by Martin Buber), in a letter of 10 February 1932 (cf. *Sitzungsprotokolle und Schriftwechsel des Vorstandes 1930-1933* [Hauptstaatsarchiv Weimar, Act Volkshochschule Thüringen, No. 278], 268.
5. cf Reichwein, A 1925 *Herbst-Bericht 1925 für die Zeit vom 7 Oktober bis 19. Dezember (Herbstarbeit der Volkshochschule Jena)*, Jena, 4-5.
6. cf Dressel, G 1995 *75 Jahre Freistaat Thüringen: Wahlen und Abstimmungsergebnisse 1920-1995, Quellen zur Geschichte Thüringens* 4, Erfurt, 86-90.

7. This letter by Hitler from 2 February 1930 was published and commented on for the first time in an essay by Fritz Dickmann in 1969. In this letter, Hitler writes 'After...our fundamental consent to participate in the government had been uttered and accepted, I demanded two things: the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Education. In my view, these are the two most important offices for us on the state level. To the Minister of the Interior there is subordinated the entire administration, the Personnel Section, which means appointment and removal of all officials, as well as the police. To the Ministry of Education there is subordinated the entire school system, from the elementary school to the University in Jena, and the entire theatre organisation. He who has at his disposal these two ministries, and who utilises his power there ruthlessly and tenaciously, can achieve extraordinary things. Of course the precondition for this is the proper personality. I fully realised that for this position not some trifling parliamentarian or devoted state official was eligible, but only a National Socialist through and through, both of high expert knowledge and unconditional National Socialist conviction. Fortunately I have in our party-member Dr Frick a man who meets these prerequisites to the greatest extent. A vigorous and resolute official, ready to take responsibility, of extraordinary ability and a fanatic National Socialist!...The second great task Dr Frick, as the Minister of Education, will see in nationalising the school system. In Thuringia we now will commission the entire school system to educate the Germans to be fanatical Nationalists. We will both clean the staff from marxist-democratic figures, and adjust the curriculum to our National Socialist tendencies and thoughts. The first step will be the establishment of a chair of Racial Problems and Racial Science at the University of Jena.' (Hitler 1930, quotation according to Dickmann, F 1969 'Die Regierungsbildung in Thüringen als Modell der Machtergreifung', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 14, 444-464. Translation from the German EM). Regarding Frick's political biography, cf Neliba, G 1992 *Wilhelm Frick: Der Legalist des Unrechtsstaates: Eine politische Biographie*. München, Wien, Zürich, 1995 'Wilhelm Frick und Thüringen als Experimentierfeld für die nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung', in Heiden, D & Mai, G 1995 *Nationalsozialismus in Thüringen*, Weimar, Köln, Wien, 75-94.
8. The socialist residential Folk High School Tinz had to suffer a cut in state subsidies amounting to 66%. This surprising fact that a National Socialist cuts all financial support for neutral adult education, but maintains to a certain degree support for socialistically directed workers' education can be explained: Tinz was especially protected by a law ('Gesetz über die Vermögensauseinandersetzung des Landes Thüringen mit den ehemaligen thüringischen Freistaaten') of March 29, 1923, that could only be changed by a state parliament majority of two thirds (cf *Gesetzsammlung für Thüringen* 1923, 22, 199-208; here: supplement C §§ 2-4, 203).
9. cf Ulbricht, J 1993 "Volkshochschule als Volk-Bildung": Intentionen, Programme und Institutionen völkischer Erwachsenenbildung von der Jahrhundertwende bis zur Weimarer Republik', *Jahrbuch für Historische Bildungsforschung* 1, 179-203, here 180.
10. cf Anon 1930 'Mitteilungen der Volkshochschule Thüringen', *Thüringer Volksbildungsarbeit*. N. F. 2. Jg., H. 2/3, Juli 1930, 24. (Reprint 1999 of the *Blätter der Volkshochschule Thüringen*, edited and introduced by Friedenthal-Haase, M and Meilhammer, E, Hildesheim, 1174).
11. *Volkshochschule Arnstadt 1928 - 1939*. (Hauptstaatsarchiv Weimar, act Volkshochschule Thüringen, No 72), 84. Translation from the German EM.
12. Stück, W 1930 'Bericht über die außerordentliche Mitgliederversammlung des Vereins Volkshochschule Arnstadt am 23. Oktober 1930', *Volkshochschule Arnstadt 1928-1939*, 85-87, here 86. Translation from the German EM.

13. Arbeitsprogramm der Volkshochschule Arnstadt vom 30.9.32 bis 1.3.33, *Volkshochschule Arnstadt* 1928-1939, 111. Translation from the German EM.
14. cf Lotze, H 1932 'Entfaltung und Entwicklung der freien Erwachsenenbildung von 1929 bis 1932', *Thüringer Volksbildungsarbeit*. N. F., 4. Jg., H. 2, Juni 1932, 26-32, here 30 (*Blätter der Volkshochschule Thüringen*, Reprint 1999, *op cit*, 1268-1274, here 1272).
15. *Blätter der Volkshochschule Thüringen*, Reprint 1999, *op cit*, 1274. Translation from the German EM.
16. cf Dressel, G 1995 *op cit*, 108-113.
17. cf on this matter the critical report on Bergner's removal in the *Jenaische Zeitung* (16 October 1932); cf also a letter by Dr Bergner to the chairman of the Folk High School Thuringia, 31 October 1932, thanking him for as he calls it, 'the honouring 'obituary'' devoted to him, in *Sitzungsprotokolle und Schriftwechsel 1930-1933*, 337.
18. cf the letter by the Thuringian Ministry of Education to the Folk High School Thuringia, 28 October 1932, in *Zusammenarbeit mit der thür. Regierung 1931-1933*, [Hauptstaatsarchiv Weimar, act Volkshochschule Thüringen, No 328], without pagination.
19. *ibid*.
20. cf the respective letter by the managing secretary of the Folk High School Thuringia, Heiner Lotze, to the Thuringian Ministry of Education, in *Zusammenarbeit mit der thür. Regierung 1931-1933*, without pagination.
21. cf session record of the Folk High School of Thuringia's board of directors on 14 October 1932, in *Sitzungsprotokolle und Schriftwechsel 1930-1933*, 148-150.
22. cf *ibid*, 149.
23. cf Meilhammer, E 1999 'Adolf Reichwein und das Prinzip Neutralität', in Friedenthal-Haase, M *Adolf Reichwein – Widerstandskämpfer und Pädagoge*, Jena, 125-44.
24. *op cit* 22.
25. *ibid*, 149, emphasis EM. Translation from the German EM.
26. cf letter by the managing secretary of the German Homeland School of Thuringia, Dr Zierfuss to the Reichspropagandaleitung HA II, Volksbildung, Munich, from 12 September, 1933, in *Gleichschaltung der Volkshochschulen und Volkshochschulheime - Umbenennung der Volkshochschule Thüringen in Deutsche Heimatschule, diese wird der Reichspropagandaleitung unterstellt*. (Hauptstaatsarchiv Weimar, act Volkshochschule Thüringen, No 280), without pagination.
27. Bickert 1933 'Das Bauerntum als Grundlage der nordischen Rasse', *Thüringer Volksbildungsarbeit*. N. F., 5. Jg., H. 3, August 1933, 26-32, here 32, translation from the German EM.