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Sparta's German Children: The ideal of ancient Sparta in the Royal Prussian Cadet-Corps, 1818-1920, and in National-Socialist elite schools (the Napolas), 1933-1945

Helen Roche

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From the eighteenth century until 1945, German children were taught to model themselves on the young of an Ancient Greek city-state: Sparta. From older children, from teachers in the classroom, and from higher authority first in Prussia, then in Imperial and National Socialist Germany, came images of Sparta designed to inculcate ideals of endurance, discipline and of military self-sacrifice. Identification with Sparta could also be used to justify ideas of domination over Germany's eastern neighbours. Helen Roche is the first to examine this still sensitive topic systematically and in depth. She collects and analyses official and published German evocations of Sparta but also, and remarkably, reconstructs the experiences of German children taught to be 'little Spartans' in the Prussian Cadet Corps and National Socialist elite schools, the Napolas. In treating the final, and gravest, period of this process, the author has personally collected testimony from numerous surviving German witnesses who attended the Napolas as children in the early 1940s. That testimony is presented here, in a work which is likely to proof definitive, not only for its treasury of new information, but for its elegant - and humane - analysis.

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