

How to educate an authoritarian society: conflicting views on school reform for a fascist society in interwar Switzerland

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Abstract

Despite its image as an antifascist stronghold, interwar-Switzerland hosted several fascist movements. So far, research has not remarked upon the extraordinarily strong involvement of educators in these groups. Exploiting Switzerland's particular situation in this period, this paper aims to shed new light on the relationship between authoritarian politics and education. To this end, we analyse the educational writings by activists of the main Swiss fascist organisation Nationale Front (NF), between 1933 and 1938, asking what role they attributed schooling in bringing their societal vision about, as well as which reforms they proposed for schooling to conform to this role. We argue that Swiss interwar-fascists considered schooling a conservative institution that could not contribute to producing an authoritarian revolution, but had to be reformed thereafter. However, despite sharing a unified vision of the future fascist Volksgemeinschaft, NF activists did not agree on what kind of schools were needed to educate it. Swiss fascists never even came close to attaining the position of power needed to execute their ideas, and thus were never burdened by practical or institutional difficulties of government. Consequently, these results suggest that, despite its totalitarian aspiration, interwar European authoritarianism did not come with a clear educational vision.

Keywords: Fascism; authoritarianism; democracy; Fronten; politics of education

1 Introduction

The image of Switzerland as an anti-fascist stronghold has played a vital role in the country's post World War II self-perception.¹ However, in the 1930s and 1940s, Switzerland actually hosted its very own authoritarian and fascist movements. Because of its size and some electoral successes, one particular faction of these movements came into the spotlight in the early 1930s: the Fronten. An internally rather heterogeneous conglomerate of groups, they named themselves after the German word Front; they described themselves as the vanguard standing at the front line of battle.

Members of the Fronten often rhetorically stressed their movement's anti-intellectualism and its deep popular roots. They pretended that, in opposition to the established parties, the Fronten were not led by a detached caste of educated intellectuals, but were grassroots movements that represented the "genuine" people.² However, if one is to consider either the Fronten's leadership or their member base, especially during their formation phase, one professional group that stands out is that of pedagogues and teachers. Paul Lang, the Fronten's chief intellectual mastermind, was a secondary school teacher. Ernst Biedermann, the first national leader (Landesführer) of the main Frontist party Nationale Front (NF), was a teacher, as was Gauleiter Karl Meyer, head of the highly successful NF subgroup in the constituency of Schaffhausen. Other prominent and leading members of the NF included figures such as the director of the Baselese teacher-training seminar and botanist Wilhelm Brenner, and Alfred Zander, a doctor in pedagogy and Pestalozzi-expert.

However, it is not only the Fronten's leading representatives that seem to show a particular affinity for education. In 1934, in Zurich, another constituency where the NF enjoyed notable success, local education administrators and teachers founded the

¹ This work was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation [grants numbers 184086 and 177998]. We are especially grateful to Sarah Van Ruyskensvelde, Giorgia Masoni, Olga Pollack as well as the anonymous reviewers for encouraging comments. A big thank you also goes to the archivists at the Archiv für Zeitgeschichte, the Staatsarchiv Schaffhausen and the Staatsarchiv Zurich, as well as the Schweizerische Bundesarchiv for their support.

² E.g. s.n., "Ein Wort an die Intellektuellen," *Die Front* 3, no. 175 (July 7, 1935).

Pedagogic Study Group of the NF (Pädagogische Studiengruppe der Nationalen Front).

This group comprised about 50 members³ and was first led by secondary school teacher Jakob Bolli, then by teacher trainer Oskar Meier.⁴ While no data documents the composition of the organisation or the actual share of educators that subscribed to the Frontist programme, undercover police investigators sent to observe the NF's gatherings in the early 1930s, did remark the extraordinarily large attendance of teachers in their reports.⁵

The prominence among the Swiss pedagogic community in the 1930s and 1940s of far-right pedagogues who openly challenged the very legitimacy of the current political and societal order intrigued us. Indeed, educational history and theory often describe schooling as a primary means to maintain people's loyalty towards the current state institutions, and to secure societal, as well as political stability.⁶ Therefore, the question of how these far-right pedagogues related education and schooling to their political ideology seems highly relevant for advancing the theoretical discussion on the relationship between schooling, politics, and

³ Jakob Bolli, "Pädagogische Gruppe des Gaues Zürich," *Die Front* 2, no. 159 (September 6, 1934).

⁴ Intelligence documentation (fiche) of Osker Meier, file E4320-01C#1990/134#109*, Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv. In 1935, this group joined the Association of National Administration and Traffic Employees (Verband des nationalen Staats-, Gemeinde- und Verkehrspersonals). However, we were not able to find any further information about this association.

⁵ E.g. Akten der Polizeidirektion 1856–1985, "Bericht vom 13. April 1933," file 2R Faszikel 18, Staatsarchiv Schaffhausen. Limond argues that the fact that some teachers and teachers' organisations agreed with fascist ideology is not surprising per se. Relying on Erich Fromm, he states that, authoritarianism being "a cultural expectation of teachers" the profession might attract so-called authoritarian personalities who are prone to fascism. Still, due to the lack of historical research concerning teachers' stances towards fascist ideology in other contexts, it is not possible here to assess whether Swiss educators differed from those of other countries in this regard. David Limond, "[R]emaining true to . . . vocation and . . . conscience," *Paedagogica Historica* 36, no. 2 (2000): 631–52.

⁶ Lucien Criblez and Rita Hofstetter, "Erziehung zur Nation. Nationale Gesinnungsbildung in der Schule des 19. Jahrhunderts," in *Die Konstruktion einer Nation*, ed. U. Altermatt et al. (Zurich: Chronos, 1998); Émile Durkheim, *Éducation et sociologie*, 10th ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013/1922); and Helmut Fend, *Neue Theorie der Schule* (Wiesbaden: VS, 2008).

authoritarianism. Hence, based on an extensive collection of source material, this article investigates how Swiss fascists conceived the relationship between schooling and politics. Thereby, we focus on Switzerland's main fascist organisation, the German-speaking NF at the peak of its popularity, between 1933 and 1938.⁷ After presenting a historical and historiographical contextualisation of the NF, we structure our discussion around three questions. First, what was the NF members' societal and political vision and what did their ideal polity and society look like? Second, which role did, or did they not attribute to schooling and education in bringing this vision about? Third, how did they propose schooling be reformed in order to comply with this vision and role?

Our study shows that Frontist pedagogues attributed a negligible role to schooling in bringing about the societal and political revolution they were hoping for. In their eyes, schooling was an inherently conservative factor that should be reformed only after the authoritarian polity, corporatist economy, and the basis of the societally homogenous and integrated Swiss Volksgemeinschaft they envisioned had been established. Youth organisations, sport clubs, and the military were seen as better educators than school could ever be. On these points, the NF members agreed. However, there was anything but consensus regarding the shape of the schooling supposed to stabilise the future authoritarian Swiss Volksgemeinschaft. We find a huge discrepancy, between the NF representatives' uniform, but highly abstract ideals about the future Volksgemeinschaft, and their concrete but extremely inconsistent and often contradictory reform propositions regarding its schooling. Moreover, although these discussions and reform proposals concerned a school meant to serve a society and polity that differed profoundly from those in place, they are not clearly discernible

⁷ Beat Glaus, *Die Nationale Front. Eine Schweizer faschistische Bewegung 1930–1940* (Zurich: Bänziger, 1969); and Walter Wolf, *Faschismus in der Schweiz* (Zurich: Flamberg Verlag, 1969). The Nationale Front – or, Kampfbund Neue und Nationale Front – was founded in 1933 from the merger of two organisations: the Neue Front, a right-wing academic think-tank founded at the University of Zurich in 1930, and the original Nationale Front. The latter had also been established by affiliates of the University of Zurich in 1930, but it later expanded into a party-like movement, with a central leadership and several regional organisations – referred to as Gaue in the Frontist lexicon. The Nationale Front was mainly concentrated in German-speaking Switzerland, whereas other fascist and irredentist movements operated in the French- and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland.

from those rooted in “mainstream” pedagogical ideas of the time – even if the latter was not working towards an authoritarian revolution.

The article is structured as follows. The first section reviews research and sources on Swiss interwar fascism. Drawing on this basis, the following section offers a brief overview of the historical context in which the discussions we analyse unfolded, and thus clarifies the significance of the Swiss case for generating insights on authoritarianism and its relationship with schooling. The next section combines insights from the literature with our analysis of the sources in order to draw a profile of the type of society and polity NF members and sympathisers hoped the fascist revolution would bring about. In the third section we explore the role these activists attributed to schooling in pursuing the revolution, and the fourth section enquires into the concrete school reforms they advocated. The conclusion brings the results together and outlines their meaning for our understanding of the relationship between authoritarianism and schooling more generally.

2 State of research, sources, and methodology

There is a general lack of scholarly work on the Swiss authoritarian and fascist movements of the first half of the twentieth century. The first and still most comprehensive studies date back to the late 1960s and the early 1970s.⁸ More recent studies engage with regional and local fascist groups, such as those located in the cities of Bern,⁹ St Gallen,¹⁰ and the Canton of Schaffhausen,¹¹ as well as in some

⁸ Glaus, *Die Nationale Front*; Wolf, *Faschismus in der Schweiz*.

⁹ Catherine Arber, “Frontismus und Nationalsozialismus in der Stadt Bern” (Master’s thesis, University of Bern, 2002), http://www.bezg.ch/img/publikation/03_1/arber.pdf (accessed November 2, 2017).

¹⁰ Thomas Metzger, *Antisemitismus in der Stadt St. Gallen 1918–1939* (Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 2006).

¹¹ Matthias Wipf, *Frontismus in einer Grenzstadt: Schaffhausen im Zweiten Weltkrieg 1933–1945* (PhD diss., University of Bern, 1998).

Italian- and French-speaking constituencies.¹² We use this literature in the next section to delineate the context in which the discussions we focus upon unfolded.

The Fronten's pedagogic engagement, on the other hand, has not yet been investigated by either historians or historians of education. Some educational studies mention these movements in passing when discussing pedagogues' role in the so-called "National Spiritual Defence Policy" pursued by the Swiss authorities to defend themselves against domestic right-wing extremism and the neighbouring authoritarian regimes during World War II.¹³ Other researchers have touched on the topic when discussing the politics of fascist youth organisations,¹⁴ or quarrels over eugenics in Swiss schoolbooks in the interwar period.¹⁵ Progressive educationalist Alfred Zander, arguably the most intriguing figure among 1930s Swiss fascist pedagogues, has also recently become the object of scholarly research. His peculiar career path from renowned Pestalozzi expert, educator, and researcher with a PhD in education, to activist in various Swiss fascist groups and, after a period spent in prison for treason, to member in the Waffen-SS, has generated different questions about his persona and ideology.¹⁶

¹² On French-speaking Switzerland: Claude Cantini, *Les Ultras* (Lausanne: Éditions d'en bas, 1992); Roger Joseph, *L'Union nationale, 1932–1939* (Neuchâtel: Ed. de la Baconnière, 1975). On Italian-speaking Switzerland: Mauro Cerutti, *Le Tessin, la Suisse et l'Italie de Mussolini* (Lausanne: Éditions Payot, 1988); Pierre Codiroli, *Tra fascio e balestra* (Locarno: Armando Dadò, 1992); and Marzio Rigonalli, *Le Tessin dans les relations entre la Suisse et l'Italie* (Locarno: Tipografia Pedrazzini, 1983).

¹³ Criblez, *Zwischen Pädagogik und Politik*; Andreas Hoffmann-Ocon, "Zur Konstruktion des Völkischen und der Rasse durch schulpädagogische Zeitschriften – 'Die Deutsche Schule' im Vergleich mit der 'Schweizerischen Lehrerzeitung,'" in *Schuljugend unter nationalem Anspruch*, ed. A. Hoffmann-Ocon and P. Metz (Zurich: Verlag Pestalozzianum, 2010), 17–62; and Heinz Moser, Franz Kost, and Walter Holdener, *Zur Geschichte der politischen Bildung in der Schweiz* (Zurich: Pädagogisches Institut, 1978).

¹⁴ Martin J. Bucher, "'Wir tragen die flatternden Fahnen der Zukunft!' Die Nationale Jugend der Schweiz: ein Schweizer Pendant zur deutschen Hitlerjugend," *Schweizer Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 61, no. 3 (2011): 315–40.

¹⁵ Andreas Hoffmann-Ocon, "Gefährliche Lehrmittel zur Vererbungslehre für unkritische Leser? Rekonstruktion und interpretative Annäherung zum Lehrmittelkonflikt am Basler Lehrerseminar 1934," *Vierteljahresschrift für wissenschaftliche Pädagogik* 89, no. 4 (2013): 566–84.

¹⁶ Anja Giudici, Thomas Ruoss, and Giorgia Masoni, "Nativist authoritarian far-right flirtations with progressive education: exploring the relationship in interwar Switzerland,"

The existing studies thus show differing research focuses, and our analysis represents the first attempt to explicitly engage with the Fronten's pedagogic activities and ideas.¹⁷ Because the Swiss authorities banned the Fronten in 1943, there are no official registers of party members or archives that systematically collect the documentation regarding these organisations – a circumstance that might to some extent explain the small amount of historical research on this topic.

Therefore, we pursued three strategies to systematically collect data for this endeavour. First, we used the aforementioned literature to identify NF members who had studied education, undergone teacher training, worked in the broader field of education, or engaged with issues of education and schooling on a regular basis. The final list includes a number of wellknown NF figureheads as well some second-tier activists, whose publications and work concerning school- and education-related themes we gathered and analysed.

Second, we systematically reviewed the newspapers and periodicals linked to the Fronten for the period between 1931 and 1938, including the main NF daily newspaper *Der eiserne Besen* (published 1931–1933) and its successor *Die Front* (1933–1943); the periodical *Schweizerische Monatshefte* for the period in which it was directed by NF leader Hans Oehler (until 1934); and the periodicals of the two biggest regional NF organisations (Gau), namely the *Eidgenössische Wacht* published by the Gau Zurich, and the *Grenzbote* published by the Gau Schaffhausen.¹⁸ These are thematically unfocused periodicals and newspapers that include articles pertaining to all the topics and news that interested NF members and sympathisers.

Swiss Journal of Educational Research, 41, no. 2 (2019), 386–403; Martin Gutmann, “Engineering the European Volksgemeinschaft,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 51, no. 1 (2016): 40–60; and Martin Näf, “Alfred Zander 1905–1997. Pädagoge, Frontist, Landesverräter,” *Traverse, Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, no. 3 (2003): 144–59.

¹⁷ See also Anja Giudici and Thomas Ruoss, “Zwischen Pädagogik und Revolution. Pädagogische Vorstellungen und Praktiken des schweizerischen Frontismus der 1930er-Jahre,” in *Schule und Reform. Veränderungsabsichten, Wandel und Folgeprobleme*, ed. F. Imlig, L. Lehmann, and K. Manz (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018), 117–31.

¹⁸ In English they would be called *The Iron Broom*, *The Front*, *Swiss Monthly Magazines*, *Swiss/Confederate Vigil*, and *Frontier Envoy*, respectively.

We scanned them in order to identify and collate all texts on education and schooling.¹⁹

Third, to complete the picture, we gathered and analysed archival holdings that document the Fronten's internal organisation and proceedings, as well as evidence produced by the Swiss political authorities, intelligence, and police while monitoring and dealing with these organisations and their representatives. The Swiss Federal Archives, as well as the State Archives of the Canton of Zurich and the Canton of Schaffhausen kindly made these sources accessible to us.

The literature often reduces the inconsistencies between fascist educational programmes and their concrete implementation to problems associated with government. Studies, including some of those comprised in this special issue,²⁰ show that the actual implementation of fascist school reforms was often hindered by the resistance of either teachers or the institutions regulating schooling and government. Contrary to fascist parties and movements in Germany and Italy, as well as the other contexts discussed in this special issue, however, Swiss fascists never found themselves in a position to actually implement the policies they envisaged. By examining their ideas and practices, we are thus confronted with organisations that never had any political responsibilities and were free to deliberate their policies for a new society and its schooling without having to deal with issues regarding their

¹⁹ Most of these articles are written by the NF's leading guard, the newspaper or review editorial boards, or well-known members. However, there are some individual articles that are signed by authors using a pseudonym or by people we were unable to identify, meaning that we cannot guarantee they were authored by actual and official NF members. Assuming that, for the NF editors to regard these articles worthy of publication, they must mirror convictions that were shared by the movement as a collective, we still use them to inquire into the NF's position in education and schooling.

²⁰ See e.g. the articles by Karcher and Condette on education policy in occupied Norway and France in this issue, as well as Klaus Peter Horn and Jörg W. Link, *Erziehungsverhältnisse im Nationalsozialismus* (Bad Heilbrunn: Julius Klinkhardt Verlag, 2011); Limond, "[R]emaining true"; Anne C. Nagel, *Hitlers Bildungsreformer* (Frankfurt aM: Fischer, 2012); Michel Ostenc, *L'éducation en Italie pendant le fascisme* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1980); and Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, "Gefangen in der eigenen Tradition – Erziehungswissenschaft angesichts des Nationalsozialismus. Eine Sammelbesprechung neuerer Veröffentlichungen," *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 49, no. 5 (2003): 734–55.

implementation. Hence, the Swiss case can offer a new and fruitful perspective for studying the relationship between schooling and authoritarianism.

3 Swiss fascism and the Fronten: historical context

With the establishment of the Swiss Confederation in the mid-nineteenth century, political liberalism became the hegemonic faction and approach to politics in federal Switzerland. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, many people felt that the confident and positive vision of modernisation liberals proposed was increasingly at odds with their daily life experiences. Fuelled by several scandals involving the Liberal Party, this general discontent gradually reshaped the Swiss political landscape. On the one hand, it contributed to the mobilisation of leftist working-class movements, which called for the state to step in and protect the population from the deleterious side-effects of modernisation.²¹ On the other hand, and on the opposite side of the political spectrum, it increased the power of Switzerland's main opposition party, the Catholic Conservatives, whose call to protect local communities and traditions from the moral and material hazards of industrialisation acquired a new attractiveness.²²

In the wake of this renewed conservatism, however, new cultural and political movements also emerged. Historian Hans Ulrich Jost calls them a “reactionary avantgarde”.²³ Indeed, while representing a quite heterogeneous conglomerate of more or less demarcated organisations with differing links to, and degrees of cooperation with the traditional Swiss parties, they all called for a radical renewal of the current political and societal order, but with the aim of restoring an idealised and allegedly lost past. In the course of the social struggles that shook Switzerland in the

²¹ Christian Koller, *Streikkultur. Performanzen und Diskurse des Arbeitskampfes im schweizerisch-österreichischen Vergleich (1860–1950)* (Wien: LIT, 2009).

²² Urs Altermatt, *Katholizismus und Moderne* (Zurich: Benziger, 1991); Bernhard Wigger, *Die Schweizerische Konservative Volkspartei 1903–1918: Politik zwischen Kulturkampf und Klassenkampf* (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 1997).

²³ Hans Ulrich Jost, *Die reaktionäre Avantgarde. Die Geburt der neuen Rechten in der Schweiz um 1900* (Zurich: Chronos, 1992).

first decades of the twentieth century and culminated in a Swiss-wide strike in 1918, a section of these groups evolved into the so-called *Erneuerungsbewegungen* (renewal movements). Drawing inspiration from fascist ideologies, they adopted firmer and more radical anti-communist and antisocialist attitudes, yearning for a future in which Switzerland would be characterised by some form of authoritarian polity, a corporatist economy, and a nativist society, namely a society composed exclusively of native Swiss, and liberated from all foreign persons and ideas that might threaten the nation's homogeneity.²⁴

The rise of these fascist-leaning movements came at a sensitive time in Swiss history. In the interwar period, and during World War II, the Swiss Confederation was not occupied, and remained officially neutral. Nonetheless, as the National Fascist Party came to power in Italy in 1922, and Hitler was appointed chancellor in Germany in 1933, Switzerland found itself encircled by the two leaders of Western fascism. Traditionally, Swiss educators, intellectuals, and education administrators had maintained close links to their German, Italian, and French counterparts. Many of the schoolbooks used to instruct Switzerland's Italian-speaking population, for instance, had been Italian imports.²⁵ However, now both the German and the Italian regimes adopted an aggressive nationalist rhetoric. By claiming the right to rule over all linguistically and culturally similar populations, they questioned multilingual Switzerland's legitimacy as an independent state,²⁶ rendering Switzerland's relationship with its southern and northern neighbours fraught. Against this backdrop, another issue became particularly worrying for the Swiss authorities: how to deal with domestic individuals and the renewal movements, which manifestly sympathised with

²⁴ Wolf, *Faschismus in der Schweiz*. See Cas Mudde, *On Extremism and Democracy in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2016), 6 for this definition of nativism.

²⁵ Giorgia Masoni, "Rapsodia del sapere scolastico: storia del manuale e dei suoi attori nel Canton Ticino (1830–1914)" (PhD diss., University of Lausanne, 2019).

²⁶ In his first speech as leader of the rightist majority in parliament, Mussolini explicitly claimed that the Italian-speaking Swiss territories rightfully belonged to the Italian state. See Benito Mussolini, *Scritti e discorsi. La rivoluzione fascista (23 marzo 1919–28 ottobre 1922)* (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1934). Furthermore, while the NSDAP leadership chose not to invade Switzerland for strategic reasons, it did also intend to incorporate the country into the German Reich eventually: see Jürgen Fink, *Die Schweiz aus der Sicht des Dritten Reiches 1933–1945* (Zürich: Schulthess, 1985).

the very ideologies and regimes that threatened Switzerland's independence. What alarmed the authorities in particular was that these movements seemed to attract a non-negligible share of the young Swiss population.²⁷

Arguably, the Fronten represented one of the most prominent and radical factions within the Swiss renewal movements. Established in the early 1930s, they captured the attention of the Swiss public in the spring of 1933, later rebranded as the Frontenfrühling (Fronten-spring). To astonished pundits of the time, it seemed that the Fronten had managed to establish themselves in the Swiss political landscape almost unnoticed and "overnight",²⁸ with their gatherings and demonstrations suddenly filling entire halls and public squares. In the 1933 election for the national parliament in the constituency of Schaffhausen, the NF candidate won 27% of the votes. In the communal elections held in Zurich the same year, an electoral coalition with Liberals and Conservatives provided NF representatives with 10 of the 125 seats in parliament.²⁹

Despite this quite extraordinary start, the Fronten's direct political influence remained limited. The party's candidates were not as successful in other constituencies, and, in 1935, more than 70% of Swiss voters rejected the referendum asking for a complete revision of the Swiss Federal Constitution, which the Fronten had organised together with the Catholic-Conservative youth organisation.³⁰ In the period that followed, the group was torn by internal divisions, and controversies between its various factions. The most contentious issue was its relationship, and the relationship of the future authoritarian Switzerland it envisioned, with Germany and the NSDAP. Some pro-German enthusiasts favoured the prospect of collaborating with the German regime. For other Frontist members, however, despite all ideological affinities, Nazi Germany's expansionist tendencies were too much of a threat to their dearly held political independence.

²⁷ Criblez, *Zwischen Pädagogik und Politik*.

²⁸ Wolf, *Faschismus in der Schweiz*, 15; all translations in the text are ours.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

But it was not only their internal quarrels that weakened Switzerland's fascist organisations and the NF in particular. The prospect and then outbreak of World War II triggered an intense debate about how to protect the country in both military and civilian terms. This debate culminated in a rapprochement of the established Swiss parties – Liberals, Catholic-Conservatives, and Social Democrats – which all got behind the government's policy of National Spiritual Defence.³¹ As argued by Lucien Criblez,³² this policy was in its essence a rigid pedagogical programme, aimed at securing and strengthening the population's patriotic commitment and loyalty towards the Swiss state in its current shape and constitution. Officialised in 1938, the National Spiritual Defence programme involved mainly two types of measures. On the one hand, action was taken to foster the Swiss population's commitment towards the state through schooling and propaganda. On the other hand, the authorities acquired the means to restrict the freedoms of press and association, and began to intervene with more determination into the affairs of groups on the extreme right fringe of the political spectrum.

The Fronten thus found themselves weakened after 1938. As demonstrating support for the German regime became grounds for prosecution, several Frontist leaders and members were accused of treason or collaboration with a foreign government. They were arrested or banned from speaking in public. Some sympathisers – including several teachers – were expelled from public office,³³ others were required to choose

³¹ Jakob Tanner, *Geschichte der Schweiz im 20. Jahrhundert* (München: C.H. Beck, 2015).

³¹ Criblez, *Zwischen Pädagogik und Politik*.

³² Criblez, *Zwischen Pädagogik und Politik*.

³³ Criblez, *Zwischen Pädagogik und Politik*; Wolf, *Faschismus in der Schweiz*; "Bericht der Untersuchungskommission für das Unterseminar Küsnacht an den Regierungsrat (Bericht Tschopp)," October 25 1945, file NL Jaeckle/690, Sachdossier 5.5.7, Archiv für Zeitgeschichte. One teacher who had to face the consequences of this kind of policies was Carl Meyer, the leader (Gauführer) of the NF section of Schaffhausen. After passing a law that forbade NF members to work in the public sector, in 1942, Schaffhausen's parliament voted a resolution to remove Meyer from his offices. Subsequently, not without reluctance, Schaffhausen's education board dismissed Meyer from his employments as secondary school teacher and board member. Another such case occurred in 1945, when the executive of the constituency of Zurich tried three educators (Rittmeyer, Corrodi, Alther) employed at the local teacher-training institute.

between their employment and their NF membership.³⁴ Consequently, certain members left the group because they were afraid of the potential negative consequences of their affiliation with a fascist organisation. This pushed the NF to officially dissociate itself from National Socialism, with the result that several prominent members also left in a sign of protest against the NF's new anti-German stance.³⁵ Meanwhile, in 1939 the Swiss censorship board started to systematically control and periodically shut down fascist publications,³⁶ until, in 1943, virtually all fascist associations and their activities were definitively outlawed. Our study thus focuses on the period between 1933 and 1939, when Swiss fascists were more or less allowed to express their opinions and were at the peak of their popularity.

4 The Frontist movement: visions and aims

Despite their internal quarrels, a unified and coherent image of the envisioned future emerges from the speeches given by NF members, their written statements and publications, as well as the NF party manifestoes. Its core purpose, the party declared, was “to fight for a healthy and strong Volksgemeinschaft of all Swiss people”, which meant “against any kind of class struggle and any fragmentation of the people through parties or interest groups” and for “a morality that is grounded in real Christianity”.³⁷

³⁴ “Interpellation Dr. E. Thalman,” October 26 1933, file Grosser Rat 61, Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt; Intelligence documentation (fiche) of Wilhelm Brenner, file E4320-01C#1990/134#20*, Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv. Wilhelm Brenner officially resigned from the NF in 1933, after a parliamentary inquiry had been set up in Basel to deliberate whether his position as teacher trainer should be terminated. Nonetheless, he secretly continued to financially support the NF's successor organisation Eidgenössische Sammlung at least until the fall of 1942.

³⁵ Wolf, *Faschismus in der Schweiz*, 79. In 1938, some former NF members founded a new organisation, the Bund treuer Eidgenossen nationalsozialistischer Weltanschauung (Union of loyal Swiss of national-socialist weltanschauung).

³⁶ Mathias Wipf, “Grenzbote und Front – rechtsextreme Schweizer Zeitungen im Zweiten Weltkrieg,” *Schriften des Vereins für Geschichte des Bodensees und seiner Umgebung*, no. 119 (2001): 271–301.

³⁷ s.n., “Kampfziele – Programm,” *Der eiserne Besen* 2, no. 23 (March 3, 1933).

The corresponding programme displays a distinctive mixture of fascist ideology and Swiss peculiarities.

On the one hand, Swiss fascists wanted to retain some Swiss-specific features, even if they might seem at odds with the movement's nativist and totalitarian attitudes. Hence, despite opposing "any fragmentation of the people",³⁸ the NF also considered the Swiss sub-state constituencies to be "the lively cells of the Volksgemeinschaft".³⁹ As publicly announced by leader Rolf Henne in 1934, the NF therefore explicitly approved of Swiss federalism. It also approved of direct democracy, and its programme declared that Switzerland should maintain and even enhance citizens' abilities to intervene directly in government and politics via referendums and initiatives.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding their nativist, organic, and culturally rooted understanding of nationalism, NF proponents also sanctioned Switzerland's multilingualism.⁴¹ To them, the future Swiss Volksgemeinschaft could and should continue to speak in multiple tongues. Even the most explicitly German-friendly NF members did not advocate dismembering Switzerland into linguistically homogenous parts. Indeed, several articles published in the newspaper *Die Front* support measures aimed at limiting the expansion of the German language in Italian-speaking Swiss regions so as to protect their Italian "nature".⁴² Occasionally, the newspaper itself includes articles written in Italian or French.

On the other hand, apart from these particularities the NF's programme bears many similarities to the manifestoes of its fascist counterparts all over Europe and the United

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Rolf Henne, "Zur Frage des Föderalismus," *Die Front* 2, no. 118 (July 20, 1934).

⁴⁰ Nationale Front, "Die 26 Punkte der Nationalen Front," in *Aufruf an das Schweizervolk* ed. Nationale Front (Bestand Politische Abteilung des Schaffhauser Landjägerkorps, "Aufruf an das Schweizervolk," file Polizei 5–11, Staatsarchiv Schaffhausen).

⁴¹ Federalism and multilingualism also were the main features of the image of Switzerland as a nation propagated by the Swiss government via the policy of National Spiritual Defence: see Anja Giudici, "Explaining Swiss Language Education Policy" (PhD diss., University of Zurich, 2019); Anja Giudici and Sandra Grizelj, "National Unity in Cultural Diversity: How National and Linguistic Identities Affected Swiss Language Curricula (1914–1961)," *Paedagogica Historica* 57, no. 1–2 (2017): 137–54.

⁴² E.g. E.T., "Ueberfremdung im Kt. Tessin," *Die Front* 2, no. 108 (July 9, 1934).

States. Regarding the economy, the NF pleaded for the implementation of a corporatist order. From a political perspective, NF activists aimed to overthrow what they termed the current “party-democracy” or, in their typical polemic language, a “comedy of political parties”.⁴³ Parliamentarianism and democratic plurality, they argued, created artificial fragmentations among what in reality was a unified and homogenous national community, and they fostered nepotism and individualism, as well as greed. Hence, they should be replaced by an “authoritarian democracy”,⁴⁴ characterised by a strong directly elected executive aided in an advisory capacity by a political council.⁴⁵

On a societal level, the NF aspired to transform the allegedly weak and fragmented Swiss population into a homogenous, totalitarian, organically delimited Volksgemeinschaft. In 1930s Switzerland, the concept of Volksgemeinschaft was not exclusive to right-wing extremists. After some controversies in the mid-1930s, the established Swiss parties had more or less agreed that, referring to Switzerland, the term Volksgemeinschaft designated the multilingual and federal Swiss “union of loyalty”,⁴⁶ characterised by both organic and voluntarist elements.⁴⁷ NF proponents defended another definition of Volksgemeinschaft. Their conceptualisation retained the multilingual element, but gave it a nativist and anti-Semitic twist. Swiss of all languages, pedagogue Alfred Zander argued, stemmed from the medieval Confederates.⁴⁸ Due to this common lineage, all except Swiss Jews held “pure blood”, belonged to the “Indo-Germanic race”, and hence were members of the same race and

⁴³ M., “So ist das System,” *Die Front* 2, no. 58 (May 9, 1934).

⁴⁴ Rolf Henne, “Der politische Katholizismus und wir,” *Die Front* 2, no. 154 (August 31, 1934).

⁴⁵ Nationale Front, “Die 26 Punkte der Nationalen Front.”

⁴⁶ Kurt Imhof, “Das kurze Leben der geistigen Landesverteidigung. Von der ‘Volksgemeinschaft’ vor dem Krieg zum Streit über die ‘Nachkriegsschweiz’ im Krieg,” *Konkordanz und Kalter Krieg in Kurt Imhof*, ed. H. Kleger and G. Romano (Zurich: Seismo, 1996), 19–84.

⁴⁷ On the distinction between organic and voluntary boundary mechanisms, see Oliver Zimmer, “Boundary Mechanisms and Symbolic Resources: Toward a Process Oriented Approach to National Identity,” *Nations and Nationalism* 9, no. 2 (2003): 173–83.

⁴⁸ Alfred Zander, *Was will die Nationale Front? 1. Teil: Volksgemeinschaft* (Zurich: Nationaler Front-Verlag, 1935), 15.

national community.⁴⁹ Their shared genetic, historical, and cultural heritage also provided them with a characteristic and unified set of “absolute values”.⁵⁰ Swiss people, it was argued in the pages of NF newspapers and pamphlets, were naturally predisposed towards loyalty and subordination to “the nation”, discipline, honour, courage, and Christian morals. If these values did not actually characterise the current Swiss society, it was only because their unfolding and development were hindered by malevolent elites and the deleterious design of political and educational institutions.

In fact, in the statements issued by NF proponents, schooling is often pinpointed as one of the main causes for the alleged negative state of the then-present Swiss society; for its fragmentation, individualism, and greed. Communist, Jewish, or liberal teachers and administrators were often accused of maliciously using the education system’s cloak of neutrality to push their own agenda. Leftist and Jewish educators were blamed for instilling “red poison”,⁵¹ or the “demon of the class struggle in our young and youngest”.⁵² Liberalism, on the other hand, was considered an ideology inherently unsuited as a basis for education. Explicitly requiring the denial of higher authorities and “leaving each individual to their own freedom”, Frontists claimed it was essentially opposed to education.⁵³ In a liberal world, where “the father thinks differently from the mother, and the teacher again has other aims than the priest, the neighbour on the left wants nothing to do with the neighbour on the right”,⁵⁴ schooling

⁴⁹ Zander therefore felt that German-, Italian-, Romansh-, and French-speaking Swiss all pertained to the same Aryan race. While on first sight this opinion might seem somewhat at odds with at least some racist and nationalist theories of the time, little is known about NF members’ seemingly contradictory understandings of race, nationalism, and Volksgemeinschaft, and their mutual relationship.

⁵⁰ Wilhelm Brenner, “Grundriß einer neuen Schule,” *Schweizer Monatshefte* 13, no. 10 (1933): 479–96, 486.

⁵¹ Karl Meyer, “Dienst am Volk,” *Die Front* 3, no. 24 (February 9, 1935).

⁵² Silvio Schnell, “Unterricht im Klassenkampf,” *Die Front* 1, no. 14 (October 13, 1933).

⁵³ Alfred Zander, “Erziehung zur Volksgemeinschaft,” in *Erziehung, Schule und Volksgemeinschaft*, ed. A. Zander and W. Brenner (Zurich: Nationaler Front-Verlag, 1935), 2–14, 10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

could only lead to “spiritual anarchy” and “wild relativism”,⁵⁵ instead of contributing to the production of the unified set of values that formed the heart of the Volksgemeinschaft. The current education system was thus failing to lead the Swiss Volksgemeinschaft “where nature and history call it to go”.⁵⁶

5 The role of schools in bringing about the Fronten’s visions

In the eyes of NF proponents, the current socio-political system and schooling were mutually linked and contributed to each other’s failings. It might thus be expected that the NF’s political and societal vision included a corresponding, specific idea of schooling, and that NF proponents would only accept educational ideas that were grounded in an authoritarian vision of society. In fact, this was their aspiration, as demonstrated particularly clearly by their fight to retain the interpretative authority over the life and writings of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, the renowned eighteenth-century Swiss pedagogue.

In 1930s and 1940s Switzerland, multiple factions made claim to Pestalozzi’s spiritual legacy. For the educators who aligned with the Swiss Government’s Spiritual Defence policy, Pestalozzi was proof of the existence of a long-standing Swiss, i.e. non-German, pedagogical tradition, inspired by the country’s traditional democratic and republican principles.⁵⁷ State authorities and the Left celebrated Pestalozzi as the spiritual father of the state-led education system that was contributing towards a more egalitarian and just Swiss society.⁵⁸ NF members were no less admiring of Pestalozzi.

⁵⁵ Der Liberalis, “Die neutrale Schule,” Die Front 1, no. 21/22 (November 7 and November 10, 1933).

⁵⁶ Zander, “Erziehung zur Volksgemeinschaft,” 13.

⁵⁷ Peter Metz, “Selbstvergewisserung und Abgrenzung – Politische Bildung als Thema der Schweizerischen Lehrerzeitung und Lehrertage zwischen 1925 und 1950,” in *Schuljugend unter nationalem Anspruch*, ed. A. Hoffmann-Ocon and P. Metz (Zurich: Verlag Pestalozzianum, 2010).

⁵⁸ Erziehungsrat Zürich, ed., *Volksschule und Lehrerbildung 1832–1932. Festschrift zur Jahrhundertfeier* (Zurich: Verlag der Erziehungsdirektion, 1932).

For their theoretical mastermind Paul Lang, Pestalozzi was the last “pedagogical genius” Switzerland had produced.⁵⁹ In the *Die Front* newspaper, Pestalozzi is often presented as a historical figure that embodied all the values the NF considered to be inherently Swiss.⁶⁰ During May Day celebrations in 1934, the NF youth organisation *Nationale Jugend* even placed a wreath of flowers beneath the statue of Pestalozzi in Zurich city centre.⁶¹

NF members glorified Pestalozzi because they considered him to have drawn his educational ideas and practices from the same corporatist, anti-Semitic, and patriotic ideal of society they themselves defended. According to Zander, Pestalozzi’s pedagogy stood in direct opposition to Liberalism, Capitalism, and Marxism. Like the *Fronten*, Pestalozzi assumed that each individual’s essence was grounded in their inclusion in a collective, that “each human individual is a creature of God, the child of a family, a limb of a social class, a comrade of a determined people, and a citizen of a state”.⁶² Furthermore, Zander recognised with admiration that Pestalozzi’s oeuvre testified to a historical and racist anti-Semitism, which strictly separated “real” Swiss nationals from Jews and their detrimental “spirit of money and commerce, their non-relatedness to a homeland and a people”.⁶³ In the eyes of NF members, Pestalozzi’s use as an emblem of a democratic or equalising education was nigh-on blasphemous. This is exemplified by the furious reaction of teacher and leader of the NF Pedagogic

⁵⁹ Paul Lang, “Die richtige Erziehung?” *Schweizer Monatshefte* 11, no. 7 (1931): 320–8, 320.

⁶⁰ E.g. Hans von Meyenburg, “Freiheit und Kultur,” *Die Front* 2, no. 239 (December 8, 1934); and Hans Uebersax, “Frontistische Schulung,” *Die Front* 4, no. 108 (May 11, 1936).

⁶¹ Glaus, *Die Nationale Front*, 265–6. The Nationalsozialistischer Lehrerbund in Nazi-Germany also glorified Pestalozzi: see Sabine Omland, *NS-Propaganda im Unterricht Deutscher Schulen 1933–1945* (Berlin: LIT, 2014). We thank Jürgen Oelkers for this suggestion.

⁶² Alfred Zander, “Pestalozzi und sein Volk,” *Schweizer Monatshefte* 13, no. 1 (1933): 28–39, 36.

⁶³ *Ibid.* Until recently, scholarship had ignored the anti-Semitic aspects of Pestalozzi’s writings: see Severin Strasky, *Pestalozzi und das Andere: Johann Heinrich Pestalozzis Bild der Juden und “Zigeuner”* (Bern: Haupt Verlag, 2006). The issue as of how to school Jewish children had already been raised in some Swiss public schools at the turn of the century: see Thomas Ruoss, *Zahlen, Zählen und Erzählen in der Bildungspolitik. Lokale Statistik, politische Praxis und die Entwicklung städtischer Schulen zwischen 1890 und 1930* (Zürich: Chronos, 2018).

Study Group Jakob Bolli, as left-wing politicians quoted Pestalozzi in the context of the festivities celebrating the hundredth anniversary of modern state-led schooling in Zurich:

Pestalozzi, the eminently sensible, religious, love-preaching, Swiss man with a strong national feeling who was close to the people. Marx, the sober, class-militant, blasphemous, hate-spouting, international Jew [. . .] Pestalozzi and Marx! Heaven and hell! No and thousand times no! He who links the two, besmirches the Swiss school system. But he who is imbued with Pestalozzi's spirit will be driven to either triumph for Pestalozzi and against Marx, or will perish trying.⁶⁴

This martial rhetoric and the belief that present-day schooling was exacerbating Switzerland's spiritual and political situation, however, should not be misread. In fact, although the NF counted several teachers, school inspectors, teacher trainers, and educational administrators in its ranks, our analyses do not indicate that the group was planning to undermine present society by reforming schooling "from within". NF members agreed that the battle for a new society was to be fought with political, not with educational means. The new societal order would be achieved either by winning elections, or, as several NF leaders confidently expressed, because young people's discontent with present society and politics would soon culminate in a "revolution from below".⁶⁵ It is only at this point that schooling should come into play. The new fascist state elite would then reform schools, so as to ensure they contributed to stabilising and perfecting the new Swiss Volksgemeinschaft. As stated by Zander: "He who, as an educator strives for an education directed at the Volksgemeinschaft must become a fellow combatant in the renewal movement, and has to dedicate himself to politics", because "the fundamental decisions in all questions concerning education are made in the political struggle".⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Jakob Bolli, "Pestalozzi gegen Marx," *Die Front* 3, no. 17 (January 21, 1935).

⁶⁵ Hans Oehler, "Revolution von unten!" *Schweizer Monatshefte* 3, no. 13 (1933): 109–18; see also Paul Lang, *Lebendige Schweiz* (Zurich: Nationaler Front-Verlag, 1935). Some might have also hoped for a German intervention, but they avoided expressing this hope in public.

⁶⁶ Zander, "Erziehung zur Volksgemeinschaft," 14.

This attitude also pervaded the activities of the Zurich-based NF Pedagogic Study Group. Founded by teacher Jakob Bolli, the Pedagogic Study Group included NF members “who are in some way pedagogically active”.

Those who are truly committed to a Christian-patriotic education are one of us, fight with us shoulder to shoulder . . . Comrades, come to us! It is imperative to expose the damage done, and work hard to create the blueprint of the new school.

Thus read Bolli’s call for his fellow members to join the newly created group, published in *Die Front* in September 1934.⁶⁷ Subsequently, the group met regularly and organised various activities, lectures, and public discussions. However, we could not find any evidence that these educators deliberated in any way on how to use their influence in classrooms and administrations to subvert the then-present order or accelerate the onset of the revolution they sought. Their only actual educational product is the booklet *Comrades, we sing!*,⁶⁸ a collection of “real Swiss songs”⁶⁹ issued in 1934. The publication was explicitly meant to foster the Swiss *Volksgemeinschaft*, but it seems to have only been used during the Study Group’s own events and meetings. Besides singing about the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the Pedagogic Study Group also employed their meetings to elaborate on the idea of how to school it. The aim was to dispose of a coherent educational programme, “as soon as the fight on the redesigning of state-led schooling officially starts”.⁷⁰

6 Ways and means of an authoritarian school reform

Swiss NF fascists shared a radical and consistent vision of a desirable future. Their ideological and political work, they agreed, should be directed towards realising a totalitarian Swiss *Volksgemeinschaft*, structured by a corporatist economy and an

⁶⁷ Bolli, “Pädagogische Gruppe des Gaues Zürich.”

⁶⁸ *Nationale Front*, ed., *Kameraden, wir singen!* (Wädenswil: Buchdruckerei Jak. Villiger & Cie., 1934).

⁶⁹ *Schweizerlieder!*,” *Die Front* 2, no. 129 (August 2, 1934).

⁷⁰ Jakob Bolli, “Aufruf an alle, denen die Kultur unseres Volkes am Herzen liegt,” *Die Front* 2, no. 201 (October 31, 1934).

authoritarian polity. They also agreed that schooling should be reformed after this vision had been realised through political means, and that schooling should then serve to secure and perfect the new societal order. However, as we will show in this section, their thoughts about the character and organisation of the “new school”⁷¹ that would serve the new authoritarian, corporatist, and totalitarian Volksgemeinschaft were neither consistent nor radical.

The lack of a consistency and radicalism in the NF’s educational thinking is even palpable in the two most intellectually ambitious elaborations on education and schooling ever proposed by NF members. This concerns, first, the essay “Blueprint for a new school” authored by the head of the Basel teacher training seminar Wilhelm Brenner and first published in the periodical Schweizer Monatshefte in 1933. In 1935, the text was reissued in a booklet that also included Zander’s “Educating the Volksgemeinschaft”,⁷² a second pivotal text for the NF’s deliberation on education.

In line with the strong biological assumptions that informed fascist ideologies and their own thinking, both Zander and Brenner downplayed the societal and educational effect of schooling. According to Zander, “school will never be able to contribute much to the selection of our leaders”.⁷³ Indeed, ability and intelligence were mostly predetermined, leaving limited scope for educational measures. Moreover, youth organisations, sport clubs, the military, and the “sum of the religious, spiritual, and popular atmosphere in which we live”, were better educators for the future unified community than the “inherently individualistic” school could ever be.⁷⁴ Similarly, Brenner argued that only a small segment of the population was summoned to think in abstract and intellectual terms. Hence, schooling should not waste time by teaching everyone such skills. The time pupils spent in school should generally be kept as

⁷¹ Brenner, “Grundriß einer neuen Schule.”

⁷² Alfred Zander and Wilhelm Brenner, ed., *Erziehung, Schule und Volksgemeinschaft* (Zurich: Front-Verlag, 1935).

⁷³ Alfred Zander, “Die Jugend der Zukunft,” *Die Front* 5, no. 243 (October 16, 1937). Another prominent fascist intellectual, Hans Oehler, defended a similar opinion by stating that “the vocation of Führer is a gift, not the result of education and schooling”; Hans Oehler, “Universität und Universitas,” *Schweizer Monatshefte* 11, no. 2 (1931): 83–91, 90.

⁷⁴ Zander, “Erziehung zur Volksgemeinschaft,” 4.

limited as possible, for school should not interfere with the practical, vocational, and moral education that only the family, the community, and professional guilds could convey.

Both Zander and Brenner also concurred that in the future, schooling should and would automatically align with the Volksgemeinschaft's uniform values. Brenner described his "new" school as an institution collectively endorsed by all parents, pupils, and the overall community, simply because it drew on "a generally recognised cultural and educational aim". In the totalitarian Volksgemeinschaft he imagined, this aim would be absolutely undisputed, since it was grounded in the values the whole society homogenously shared: "Christian religion, moral responsibility, and patriotic ethos."⁷⁵ Zander also argued that in the future, school itself would become a community in which "pupils and teachers serve a higher ideal together," this ideal (NB singular) being "the service to the Volksgemeinschaft".⁷⁶

However, despite their shared belief that the Volksgemeinschaft's uniform values would generate a fundamental agreement on the way it should be educated, Brenner's and Zander's more concrete visions about how schooling should be structured and organised exhibit some substantial disagreements. Brenner defended the opinion that the curriculum of comprehensive state-led schools should be stripped to the bare minimum. Schools were only meant to convey what families and the community were unable to. Hence, school should only teach basic reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion and include only contents that were "the expression of the culture of our people, and that therefore convey the fundament of the community to the young generation".⁷⁷ This could be done in about five or six years, so that having reached age 11, children could either change to a vocational school run by professional guilds, or, the few "predisposed to become intellectual leaders", to college.⁷⁸ Brenner also argued that school instruction should focus on discipline, obedience, and order:

⁷⁵ Brenner, "Grundriß einer neuen Schule," (1935): 21.

⁷⁶ Zander, "Erziehung zur Volksgemeinschaft," 11.

⁷⁷ Brenner, "Grundriß einer neuen Schule," (1933): 18.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

“Without discipline there is no productive school.”⁷⁹ Schools should introduce children to the “authority of the state”, because the state itself should be interested in discipline being enforced from an early age for “an undisciplined pupil develops into an undisciplined citizen”.⁸⁰ Additionally, contending that parents did not show enough appreciation for state-run schools, Brenner favoured the introduction of school fees for all years.

This project differs significantly from the school envisioned by Alfred Zander. For the fervent advocate of progressive education and adherent of the New Education Fellowship, only a well-developed system of schooling, a “site of community building, work, character formation, spiritual liveliness, and youthful cheerfulness” could contribute towards perfecting the future Volksgemeinschaft.⁸¹ Discipline and an authoritarian relationship between teacher and pupil were not central to Zander’s educational vision. In his eyes, teachers and students were to work “together”⁸² towards a greater ideal. Indeed, in an essay reflecting on his past as primary school teacher, Zander called his pupils his “best critics” and argued for understanding the teacher’s role as that of a scientifically informed observant of the child’s development, rather than a judge.⁸³ Zander also opposed the educational prioritisation of intellectual activities such as reading, writing, or arithmetic, and argued that “today’s excessive focus on knowledge and shaping the mind has to be cut down to size”.⁸⁴ Accordingly, the curriculum envisioned by Zander had wide-ranging aims, as he expected schooling to produce the “physically and spiritually healthy Swiss Volksgenosse, whose valuable predispositions are fully developed, who is of full of character, and Christian”.⁸⁵ While Zander did not elaborate on the school subjects and organisation

⁷⁹ Ibid., 31.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Zander, Was will die Nationale Front? 8.

⁸² Zander, “Erziehung zur Volksgemeinschaft,” 11.

⁸³ Alfred Zander, “Aufzeichnung aus einer schweiz. Versuchsschule,” Schweizerische pädagogische Zeitschrift 39, no. 2/4: 90–9, 90.

⁸⁴ Zander, Was will die Nationale Front? 8.

⁸⁵ Zander, “Die Erziehung zur Volksgemeinschaft,” 14.

he wanted to see implemented, he did specify that schooling should comprise a wide range of activities, including group work, events relating children to their community, and sports. Furthermore, Zander argued that all state-led schools, from kindergarten up to universities, should be entirely free of charge, as to ensure a merit-base selection of talents.

The already rather incongruent reform guidelines sketched by Brenner and Zander did not meet unqualified approval from other pedagogically engaged NF proponents. First and foremost, the rather restrictive educational and societal role the two intellectuals attributed to schooling belittled teachers' work. It thus provoked fierce opposition among other party members, and teachers in particular. School, asserted an article published in *Die Front*, "has a very important role in education generally".⁸⁶ According to a commentary authored by the Zurich Pedagogic Study Group in 1936, it was not schooling which should be aligned to the community's values, as much as it was pupils and their "fellow human beings [who] should be educated to respect schooling".⁸⁷ In several other writings teachers like Oskar Meier or Paul Lang highlighted the significance of teacher education and teachers themselves in educating the community and selecting its future rulers: "he who controls teacher education", Meier argued, "controls the future".⁸⁸ In Lang's emphatic rhetoric, teachers were "the last authority able to bind together the shattered cosmos ... Never was the educator's autonomous personality, which binds together the dispersed colours of the being into one unity, more important for the youth than today."⁸⁹

The educational and societal role of schooling and teachers, however, was not the only contentious point in NF writings. Several educators, among them the first leader of the NF Pedagogic Study Group, Bolli, strongly disapproved of the principles of progressive education that Zander embraced with such fervour. They accused progressive education of fostering the individualism and selfishness that was

⁸⁶ H.R. Pfister, "Schule und Disziplin," *Die Front* 4, no. 225 (September 25, 1936).

⁸⁷ Pädagogische Gruppe, "Der Schüler in der neuen Volksschule," *Die Front* 4, no. 257, 4 November 1936.

⁸⁸ Oskar Meier, "Volksschule und Lehrerbildung," *Die Front* 4, no. 28 (4 February 1936).

⁸⁹ Lang, "Die richtige Erziehung?"

corrupting their contemporaries. Only instruction that valued teachers and their authority, they argued, could convey to children the “joy to obey” that was necessary for them to serve the national community.⁹⁰ By putting “his majesty the child” at the centre of education instead, progressive education subordinated teachers to children’s “individual wishes and extravagances”, ultimately contributing to “rearing a defrauded and ragged generation of inimical individuals”.⁹¹

Another point that stands out among the many contrasting propositions we found in Swiss fascists’ writings on education, is the issue of the best place to train teachers. For teacher trainer Brenner, the development of future teachers should be informed by scientific knowledge, and thus be assigned to universities or academically oriented institutes.⁹² In opposition, several other NF pedagogues, including teacher, and second leader of the Pedagogic Study Group, Oskar Meier, argued that teacher training should primarily shape teachers’ worldview and not convey scientific knowledge. For them, it was crucial to the future Volksgemeinschaft that teachers were trained in small and convivial, practically oriented seminaries. Teachers were not to “escape into science” and their training should be a “folkloric and traditional general education”.⁹³⁹²

Other controversies touched upon such crucial issues as the role of the family in children’s education, how to select the best talents in schooling and universities, the financing of these institutions, the structure of the education state – with some NF members such as Zander favouring a federalist education system where the authority over schooling lay with the sub-state constituencies and others advocating the creation

⁹⁰ Jakob Bolli, “Erziehung – Wozu?,” *Die Front* 3, no. 176 (August 1, 1935).

⁹¹ Jakob Bolli, “Pestalozzi und Marxismus,” *Die Front* 2, no. 59 (11 May 1934).

⁹² Andreas Hoffmann-Ocon and Peter Metz, “Orte der Ausbildung von Lehrerinnen und Lehrern – bildungshistorischer Kommentar aufschlussreicher Quellen,” *Beiträge zur Lehrerbildung* 29, no. 3 (2011): 312–24. ⁹²Oskar Meier, “Schule und Lehrerbildung,” *Die Front* 4, no. 28 (5 February 1936).

⁹³ See Zander, *Was will die Nationale Front*. Lang, on the other hand, argued for centralisation: Lang, *Lebendige Schweiz*. The Pedagogic Study Group supported Lang’s position: see Jakob Bolli, “Pädagogische Gruppe des Gaues Zürich,” *Die Front* 2, no. 201 (25 October 1934).

of a centralised Swiss department for education⁹⁴ – and even the content of education. Regarding the latter, for instance, Brenner demanded a curriculum firmly rooted in “our culture”,⁹⁵ meaning that schools should only teach children to read and write in the local language. Others took the commitment towards Switzerland’s official multilingualism more seriously and requested curricula that included all three official Swiss languages. Schooling, argued an author in *Die Front*, “exists not least to mould the young Swiss person to become a citizen, a citizen of trilingual Switzerland”.⁹⁶

In their articles, the authors behind these propositions rarely mention opposing claims made by their comrades. It generally seems that they hardly interacted with each other. However, even where an actual deliberation occurred, no shared consensus seems to have been reached. This is the case of the Zurich-based Pedagogic Study Group, which, as we mentioned earlier, had been created explicitly to elaborate a shared educational reform agenda. In autumn 1934, the study group members took up their discussions using Brenner’s Blueprint for a new school as their point of departure. After one year, the group’s director published an article in *Die Front*, in which he acknowledged that a “method” for educating the *Volksgemeinschaft*, a “Swiss-confederate-socialist theory of education”,⁹⁷ was still lacking. Another two years went by and, in 1936, the Pedagogic Study Group had still not reached agreement. It declared:

We cannot and do not want to present something that is finished and completed yet, and what we write, does not have to be binding for the whole movement and its leadership.⁹⁸

While the group continued to meet and organise events on a regular basis, the only publication it actually produced after this statement, was an article that appeared in

⁹⁴ See Zander, *Was will die Nationale Front*. Lang, on the other hand, argued for centralisation: Lang, *Lebendige Schweiz*. The Pedagogic Study Group supported Lang’s position: see Jakob Bolli, “Pädagogische Gruppe des Gaues Zürich,” *Die Front* 2, no. 201 (25 October 1934).

⁹⁵ Brenner, “Grundriß einer neuen Schule” (1935), 18.

⁹⁶ Erwin Thomman, “Mehr Verständnis für den Kanton Tessin,” *Die Front* 2, no. 251 (22 December 1934).

⁹⁷ Bolli, “Erziehung – wozu?”.

⁹⁸ Meier, “Volksschule und Lehrerbildung.”

Die Front in late 1936 about the “Pupil in the new popular school”.⁹⁹ The text, authored by the collective, re-states their belief that present-day schooling was corrupted by “agitators” and that, in the future, it should be reformed so as to serve the Volksgemeinschaft. It also insists on the importance of teachers’ roles in this process, but does not include any concrete proposal regarding the means whereby this aim should be achieved.

These discussions do not only bear testimony to the Frontists’ division when it came to concrete reform proposals. In his 1933 book, Brenner declared that the quality of the future school would no longer be judged by its underlying “philosophical or pedagogic theories” any more, but only by its “success in securing and invigorating the Volksgemeinschaft”.¹⁰⁰ This and other statements attest to the NF members’ intention to radically break with the criteria used to assess and discuss schooling at the time. Nevertheless, no such radical break emerges from their actual discussions on how to concretely reform schooling.

As mentioned earlier, the issues dominating these discussions were: the advantages and disadvantages of progressive education versus more teacher-centred methods; whether teacher-training should take place in universities or seminaries; the number of languages to teach; and how to foster movement and health in formal education. However, these issues characterised the then Swiss pedagogical debate in general, and were also addressed by pedagogues who explicitly opposed the NF and wanted to preserve the Swiss state from fascist influences.¹⁰¹ If the texts authored by NF activists had not been written in the movement’s characteristic martial, often anti-Semitic and almost always anti-Marxist jargon, they could barely be distinguished from the articles on “education for the community” and “authority and leadership” in the journal of the leading liberal Swiss Teachers’ Organisation,¹⁰² or the debate about the

⁹⁹ Brenner, “Grundriß einer neuen Schule” (1935): 32.

¹⁰⁰ Brenner, “Grundriß einer neuen Schule” (1935): 32.

¹⁰¹ Criblez, *Zwischen Pädagogik und Politik*; Hoffmann-Ocon, “Zur Konstruktion des Völkischen.”

¹⁰² R. Heller-Lauffer, “Erziehung zur Gemeinschaft,” *Schweizerische Lehrerzeitung* 79, no. 1 (1934): 3–5; Arthur Mojonner, “Autorität und Führung,” *Schweizerische Lehrerzeitung* 79, no. 21: 261–2.

“problem of leadership” and the reinstatement of authority in Swiss classrooms as approached by the journal of the Catholic Teachers’ Organisation.¹⁰³

7 Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to investigate how Swiss interwar fascists – represented by Switzerland’s then main fascist organisation Nationale Front – conceived the relationship between schooling and politics. Our analysis finds that, politically, the NF had a consistent and radical aim. Its supporters longed for a revolution that would replace the current system with a totalitarian society, a corporatist economy, and an authoritarian polity. After the revolution, its leadership and affiliated educators intended to reform education and schooling. Education as a means to foster subordination, health, and discipline seems to be the principle everyone could agree upon as the basis of a very rudimentary programme for a school reform in Switzerland. Beyond that, a consensus on what kind of schooling could best serve an authoritarian and totalitarian society and polity seems to be lacking. In fact, the concrete political and pedagogical reforms proposed by the fascist protagonists we investigated are contradictory, and can hardly be distinguished from the propositions discussed within the pedagogic mainstream by educators supporting the then-present societal order.

In this light, it seems impossible to outline a consistent set of characteristics that could be considered to be constitutive for schooling an authoritarian society. The discussions we reviewed clearly show that education, as highlighted by Biesta, is a “teleological practice”, and thus always directed towards a particular “outcome”.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ E.g. Carli Fry, “Literatur zum Führerproblem,” *Schweizer Schule* 20, no. 4 (1934): 164–6; Otto Karrer, “Krise und Rettung des Autoritätsgedankens,” *Schweizer Schule* 20, no. 5 (1934): 193–204. The proximity between fascist and Catholic educational discourse has also been discussed in other contexts, recently by Sarah Van Ruyskensvelde, *Wartime Schooling and Education Policy in the Second World War: Catholic Education, Memory, and the Government in Occupied Belgium* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹⁰⁴ Gert Biesta, “Philosophy of Education for the Public Good. Five Challenges and an Agenda,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44, no. 6 (2012): 581–93.

Education is “politics with different means”¹⁰⁵ and school reforms are not neutral, but are explicitly formulated or enacted to bring about, or to hinder particular understandings of society. In addition, however, our study also shows that the directionality of reforms does not seem to imply that political ideologies, however differing their underlying assumptions may be, all have “their own” pedagogy.

The Swiss case, we believe, does tell us something about education and authoritarian politics in particular. First, it highlights how teachers’ and educationalists’ professional identities and knowledge did not render them immune to fascist ideology. This finding calls for more comparative and historical research into the educational community’s potentially conflictive relationship with authoritarianism and democracy, and the role it has attributed itself in promoting different societal visions. Second, and crucially – as we mentioned earlier – Swiss fascists never attained a position of power. If they had, however, they would have been forced to address their disagreements before being able to engage in school reform. Given the fundamental differences within the movement itself, this would have doubtless been a long and tormented process. No matter how authoritarian their system of government, they probably would have been incapable of developing, deciding upon, and implementing education policies that fundamentally transformed schooling, at least in the medium term. An actual reform of schooling in the direction of an authoritarian state, we thus conclude, is not only hindered by the factors pinpointed by the literature so far: institutional constraints, the traditions inscribed in present schooling or government, and some actors and especially teachers’ refusal to fully carry it out. It can also be hindered by a lack of consensus on what schooling and education within an authoritarian state should look like.

¹⁰⁵ Criblez, *Zwischen Pädagogik und Politik*, 363.