

Resource 19: Peterson on Hahn

The extract below is taken from Schools Across Frontiers by Alec Peterson

The school at Salem, of which he [Hahn] became headmaster in 1920, brought together children of former enemies, German and British, and when, in 1932, Hitler showed his true colours, Hahn took the courageous step of writing to all former pupils telling them that 'if they were members of the SA or the SS they must break with Hitler or break with Salem'. It led to his arrest, and only the intervention of Ramsay MacDonald, the British Prime Minister, got him out into exile in Britain.

In Britain Hahn founded, or was instrumental in founding, Gordonstoun School (at which Prince Charles, now Prince of Wales and President of the United World Colleges, was educated); The Outward Bound movement, which has spread to many other countries; the Duke of Edinburgh's Award; and finally, the United World Colleges.

All of these were attempts to actualise the profound educational convictions which governed his life. In themselves they exemplify one of the profoundest of all these convictions – that if you believe in something, you must not just think or talk or write, but must act. All education that Hahn cared for was aimed at changing young people's attitudes in such a way as to lead them to change their actions. The attitudes he wanted to change were: national and racial prejudices and the causes of war; something which he used to call 'spectatoritis', the preference for watching other people do things rather than doing them oneself; and what he often described as the 'declines' which were affecting youth as a result of the exhausted, disenchanted, and increasingly cynical culture of post-war Europe and America: the decline in physical fitness, in enterprise, in memory and imagination, in skill and care, in self-discipline, and in compassion. Long before most educators, Hahn was shocked by the catchwords 'Ohne mich' and 'I couldn't care less'. He would, I believe, be shocked today to find 'caring' transformed into a politician's catchword and 'compassion' into a cliché. As educational remedies for these attitudes, he saw the common involvement of young people of different nations and cultures in active, skillful, challenging (even physically dangerous) service to others, particularly the saving of life: in academic studies that taxed the memory and imagination; in teamwork which involved both exercising and accepting leadership; and in the pursuit by each individual of his 'grand passion' whether that was playing the cello, building boats, entomology, or Renaissance architecture. It was the vision of an idealist and of a teacher, but Hahn was both a platonist and a realist, a teacher who had the genius for translating his visions and inspiring others to translate his vision into action. (p2)