

## **‘Fate Comes to the Mission Schools’: Fire at Bethel, 1953**

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### **Abstract**

In May 1953, students burnt down the buildings at the Bethel Training Institute run by German missionaries. The article draws on recent approaches to the study of fire in South African protest movements to argue that the incident was a turning point in the history of the institution. It argues that the fire can be understood as both destructive and productive. It destroyed existing institutional tensions around disciplinarian as opposed to liberal approaches to the governance and management of the institution. But it also paradoxically helped to usher in a new order, that of Bantu Education. As such, it provides insight into some of the material conditions of compliance of this Mission Society with the new emerging order of state control. The article explores both these dimensions: the internal educational regime of the institution thus revealed and how conditions were created for a rapid transition to state control. The article is based on a combination of mission and official sources.

**Key words:** mission education; student protest; Hermannsburg Mission Society; Bantu Education; History of South African education

At 11.15pm on the night of 14 May 1953, the District Commandant of the South African Police based at Lichtenburg in the Transvaal received a report that trouble was brewing among the African students at the Bethel Training Institution situated in a remote rural corner of the western Transvaal’s maize belt between Ventersdorp and Coligny. Five white and four African constables were immediately despatched to the scene. They arrived about an hour later. En route, they noticed that buildings were ‘on fire and burning seriously’. On arrival they discovered that approximately 200 students were in uproar and called for reinforcements. By 2.30am another 18 white and 12 African members of the police force had arrived to quell the uprising. By that stage the school had had been reduced to glowing embers. The police moved to the dining hall where the students had gathered, held a roll call, and searched the dormitories and students. They found pamphlets

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stating as their grievances inadequate diet, bad accommodation and unjust expulsion of one of the scholars. One-hundred-and-eighty-four students were arrested, of whom 69 were females and 115 males. The students were charged with arson, alternatively public violence or malicious injury to property. They appeared in court on 16 May where all but two pleaded not guilty to the charges. The case was remanded to 29 May.<sup>1</sup> Burnt down were the entire school and pump-house, the headmasters' and two teachers' homes.

What happened here that night, why and with what consequences is important for a number of reasons. First, the *timing*: this event happened one month before the reading of the Bantu Education Bill in Parliament and in the context of a Defiance Campaign that had been launched across the country in 1952 against the new apartheid laws. Fire had played a role here in the burning of passbooks by Nelson Mandela and other activists.<sup>2</sup> Second, the immediate *context*: the incident occurred in an educational institution established by a Lutheran Mission Society not prominent at that time amongst those Societies opposing segregationist educational trends. Third, it provides insight into the *relationship between the mission and the state* at that point, and the conditions under which the transition from mission to apartheid education and control occurred within institutions more compliant than others to the state and yet still wanting to retain a degree of control. Fourth, the immediate causes, course and outcome of this uprising provide insight into the different approaches taken and practiced at the time within mission schools to *authority, rights, and democracy*.

Neither at Bethel in particular nor at mission schools in general were these kinds of disturbances unusual; they were typical of student riots wracking mission institutions across the country.<sup>3</sup> In the 1940s student protests were typically against food and discipline in mission institutions. They were a symptom of a system under strain, 'crumbling' in the face of inadequate resources and increased demand for places. They were signs that missions were losing their hegemonic control.<sup>4</sup> While Hyslop has illuminated the broad contours and features of how a policy and system responding to a crisis in social reproduction was called into being and resisted,<sup>5</sup> and Healy-Clancy has illuminated its particularly gendered character through the case-study of Inanda Seminary for Girls in Natal,<sup>6</sup> the process

1. Central Archives Depot (CAD), NTS, South African Police (SAP) 509, 15/8/53: Report from Office of the Deputy Commissioner, Transvaal to Commissioner of the South African Police re Riot: Bethel Native Training Institution, 22 May 1953.
2. K. Chance, "'Where there is Fire, there is Politics': Ungovernability and Material Life in Urban South Africa', *Cultural Anthropology*, 30, 3 (2015), 401
3. J. Hyslop, 'Food, Authority and Politics: Student Riots in South African Schools 1945–1976', in S. Clingman ed., *Regions and Repertoires: Topics in South African Politics and Culture* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1991), 84–115; C. Bundy, 'Schooled for Life? The Childhood and Education of Govan Mbeki', Yale University Seminar Paper (2 December 1992).
4. Hyslop, 'Food, Authority and Politics', 114
5. See inter alia J. Hyslop, 'State Education Policy and the Social Reproduction of the Urban African Working Class: The Case of the Southern Transvaal 1955–1976', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14, 3 (1988), 446–476; J. Hyslop, "'A Destruction Coming In": Bantu Education as Response to Social Crisis', in P. Bonner, P. Delius and D. Posel, eds, *Apartheid's Genesis 1935–1972* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1993); J. Hyslop, *The Classroom Struggle: Policy and Resistance in South Africa 1940–1990* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1999).
6. M. Healy-Clancy, *A World of their Own: A History of South African Women's Education* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2014).

occurred, as Kros and Fleisch have argued, within an intellectual climate in which the educational if not the political rationale of state control was widely accepted.<sup>7</sup> On this basis, Richard Elphick has argued that leading missionary schools 'capitulated' and closed their doors without much protest when confronted in 1953 with the option of either retaining control of their schools at reduced subsidy or relinquishing them to the state or going private.<sup>8</sup> Not many studies exist of the actual internal processes which accompanied the process of state takeover, closure or going private, and how schools actually changed. One exception is that by Healy-Clancy,<sup>9</sup> but here, as in much of the literature on the process, the focus is on the prominent and more well-to-do mission schools. This article focuses on one of the poorer mission institutions whose alumnae were not as visible within the professions and politics as those from the bigger and more vocal English-speaking missions. As such it provides insight into the complexities of the politics of accommodation to Bantu Education among more compliant missions, how turbulent local conditions and internal dynamics within schools facilitated the takeover by a state already intimately involved with these schools as well as the pedagogical regimes of belief and practice that shaped their daily work.

The fire at Bethel in 1953 throws all this into sharp relief. Jonathan Hyslop has written extensively of the 'repertoires of resistance', including arson, stone-throwing and boycott that students deployed at this time and right through into the 1970s. More recently, historians and anthropologists have provided more insight into the role of fire in protest movements. Helene Strauss has spoken of burning objects as providing 'spectacles of disappointment', signalling 'violence and bodies in pain, on the one hand, and cleansing, renewal, and a stripping of illusion and fakery on the other'.<sup>10</sup> Kerry Chance uses a notion of fire as both destructive and productive.<sup>11</sup> Both help provide a perspective on the significance of the burning of the buildings in that context. What was unusual about the 1953 arson was precisely its timing and broader underlying educational issues that emerged.<sup>12</sup> The fire in 1953, it will be argued here, marked a turning point in more ways than one. It both destroyed the intense conflicts underlying the educational regime at Bethel, bringing to an end both the 'illusion' of authority and control and 'the fakery' of liberal participation. It asserted the power of students in a context fraught by powerlessness, indecision and uncertainty. But it also helped to precipitate the birth of a new order,

7. C. Kros, *The Seeds of Separate Development: Origins of Bantu Education* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2010); B. Fleisch, 'State Formation and the Origins of Bantu Education', in P. Kallaway, ed., *The History of Education under Apartheid, 1948–1994: The Doors of Learning and Culture shall be Opened* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 39–53.
8. R. Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 288–289.
9. Healy-Clancy, *A World of their Own*, 2014.
10. H. Strauss, 'Spectacles of Promise and Disappointment: Political Emotion and Quotidian Aesthetics in Video Installations by Berni Searle and Zanele Muholi', *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 15, 4 (2014), 471–495.
11. Chance, 'Where there is Fire', 399–400.
12. Interestingly, the institution was not part of the wave of disturbances across mission institutions discussed in the Union Education Department Report of the Committee to Investigate Disturbances into Native Institution, 1947: Lutheran Theological Institute (LTI) archive, Pietermaritzburg, GOV 2: Government Circulars etc. Box 32: see Appendix C, p. 17.

integration into the system of Bantu Education. The fire dramatically threw into the air the existing educational regime for a short period, but this regime soon settled back into familiar patterns, albeit within a significantly altered broader context, with immense implications for the school and education in the country as a whole. As such, the incident provides a concentrated and condensed image of both what had been and what was to come.

This paper will provide a brief history of the Bethel Institute, and show how the tensions that gave rise to the arson lay many years before. It will look at the immediate and longer-term consequences through an examination of the actions of the Mission, Department and courts and what happened to the students, the institution and its leadership in the short and long term. The paper argues that tensions around different approaches to discipline, student control and rights were manifested in a conflict between the Mission superintendent on the one hand and the principal and some of the teachers on the other. It relies mainly on published and unpublished mission and state sources. The voice of the missionaries and the state are dominant in these sources, and so their perspectives are too. The voices and perspectives of the teachers and students involved are mediated through these records. Only in their statements to the Commission of Inquiry are the teachers' voices direct. But these, like all the other sources, have to be read against the grain, not as 'truth', but as truths produced within a context, and for a specific purpose.<sup>13</sup> Students' voices are completely silent in the sources. But their voice, as expressed through their actions, was loud.

### **Bethel Training Institute 1920–1953**

Bethel was a seminary consisting by 1953 of a secondary school, teacher training college and hostels, and should be distinguished from Bethal, the town.<sup>14</sup> It was founded by the Lutheran Hermannsburg Mission Society. The Society first started mission activities in Natal and Zululand in 1854 and then moved into the Transvaal in 1857. Known as a *bauern* (farmer or peasant) mission, its social origins lay in farming and artisanal work. Holding a generally isolationist stance towards other Lutheran missions, its members integrated into white settler society and by virtue of their mission work in African communities played an interstitial role between settler and African societies.<sup>15</sup>

13. See K. Rüter, *The Power Beyond: Mission Strategies, African Conversion and the Development of a Christian Culture in the Transvaal* (Münster: LIT, 2001) for a discussion of the limitations and possibilities of using mission sources.
14. The teacher training qualifications it was possible to obtain at the Bethel Training Institution in 1951 consisted in the (a) Native Teachers' Higher Certificate, for which the qualification was the Junior Certificate (JC); (b) the Native Teachers' Lower Certificate, which required as entrance qualification Form 1 or Std VI and a special entrance examination administered by the Department of Native Education in the Transvaal; (c) Matriculation, which also required JC. The Institution awarded a limited number of loan bursaries for teachers. There were also a few free bursaries awarded by the Department. Boarding fees were £14 p.a.; sports 5/0d, and 'book accounts amounted to approximately £3 per annum': Wits Historical Papers Research Archive, Collection Number: AD1715 South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), 1892–1974, 'A Survey Conducted by the South African Institute of Race Relations: Careers for Africans, Part II Training Colleges and Industrial Schools,' Johannesburg 1951, pp. 18, 19.
15. F. Hasselhorn, *Bauernmission in Südafrika: Die Hermannsbürger Mission im Spannungsfeld der Kolonialpolitik 1890–1939* (D7 Göttinger Philosophische Dissertation. Verlag der Ev-Luth. Mission. Erlangen, 1988);

Missionaries Ernst Penzhorn and H. Wenhold of the Hermannsburg Mission Society started planning the establishment of a seminary on the mission farm Holgat in 1920.<sup>16</sup> In the early 1920s, the mission participated in the short-lived alluvial diamond diggings in the area by buying claims on Holgat and the adjoining farm in May 1924.<sup>17</sup> The seminary opened in the same year with four scholars to whose number three more were added in the coming weeks. From its inception, the students were the children of farm workers drawn from the surrounding farms and small towns of the Western Transvaal. Students ranged in age from 16 to 39. In accordance with departmental requirements for registration, instruction was given in English, with the exception of religious instruction, which was in Tswana. The institution was built with some difficulty, given the lack of resources, but in 1924 it also opened a boarding house for the scholars. The school included primary schooling as well as Stds V and VI, which were the necessary teacher qualification. In 1938 the Mission also began training evangelists and pastors in a separate building.

The first school strike occurred a mere nine years after its founding. Principal Karberg described it as a near 'Palace Revolution'.<sup>18</sup> The precipitating incident was the actions of a teacher who had cut out the answers to exercises provided at the back of the London Missionary Society's SeTswana Grammar that a class was using. He did so on the grounds that the students were cheating repeatedly, and looking for answers instead of thinking about them. The students felt they had been denied their rights to books that were their personal property and demanded to be paid or their money back for the seven torn-out pages. The teachers and students finally agreed, after a discussion, that the offending pages could be stuck back in when they left the school. But the morning after the agreement, the pupils appeared with placards stating 'Industrial Commercial Workers' Union', then a militant union active particularly in the rural areas of the Transvaal. In 1933 there was another mini-revolt when the students were served only bread and no porridge for breakfast one morning because the oven's chimney flue had broken. Although they were given two helpings of porridge at lunchtime to compensate, this incident, so small in the eyes of the missionaries and so large in the eyes of the students, developed into a 'great protest action' resulting in 22 scholars being sent home.<sup>19</sup>

The Seminary received Departmental recognition in 1935, mainly because it appointed as head of the educational side of the institution a person who, although from the mission stable, had the necessary professional qualifications. Tensions immediately emerged between the Mission and the Department. On the occasion of the 1937 visit to the school of W.W.M. Eiselen, Chief Inspector of Native Education, the Inspector insisted that the

B. Mbenga and A. Manson, *'People of the Dew': A History of the Bafokeng of Phokeng-Rustenburg Region, South Africa, from Early Times to 2000* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2010).

16. H. Voges, 'Die Arbeit im Südlichen Afrika', in Ernst-August Lüdemann, ed., *Vision: Gemeinde Weltweit: 150 Jahre Hermannsburger Mission und Ev-luth. Missionswerk in Niedersachsen* (Verlag der Missionshandlung: Hermannsburg, 2000), 269; see also H. Meyberg, *Gedanken & Worte Band 4: Bethel, Südafrika, eine Schule von Menschen geplant, von Gott geführt* (Pretoria: H. Meyberg, 2002), 13/4.
17. Evengelische-Lutherische Mission Hermannsburg (henceforward ELM H) SA acc. 76. 518: Bethel Diamond Diggings 1924; Dept of Mines and Industries Certificate of Owner's Claims no 43 signed at Klerksdorp 16 May 1924; see also SA acc. 76.1456.
18. See Meyberg, *Gedanken & Worte*, 19–20.
19. *Ibid.*, 20.

principal take over leadership of the Institution as a whole. The Governing Body of the school would have none of it, preferring the superintendent, accountable to the Mission, to play this role. The meeting signalled the beginning of a long-simmering conflict between the state-appointed principal responsible for the school and the Mission-appointed superintendent who was responsible for the Institution as a whole including the hostel.<sup>20</sup>

In 1945 Hermann Greve took over as superintendent and hostel House Father in charge of 144 pupils.<sup>21</sup> He was not overjoyed at the prospect. The talk of a ‘bolshevist spirit’ among the school pupils had disturbed him.<sup>22</sup> It had become evident over a dispute with the school over the compulsion to do manual labour. Shortly before Greve’s transfer,<sup>23</sup> the Institution had sent a circular to all the parents, informing them that students had been doing work such as chopping wood, carrying water for the kitchen, fetching post, building the Institution’s roads, and so on in exchange for charging low boarding and lodging fees. Since students had complained that the work was too much, refused to fulfil these duties and demanded that the Institution appoint labourers, the school was giving parents an option. Either their children continued as before with no additional fees, beyond an extra £1 for board and lodging to compensate for rising food costs, or they did not, but at a cost of an additional £3 per student per year to cover the cost of workers. Not surprisingly, parents voted for the former.

For the missionaries themselves, asking students to do this kind of work was a perfectly normal expectation – it is what they did themselves at home in their rural hinterland of the Lüneberger Heide in Germany as peasant farmers and artisans, and it accorded with the roles of Africans as workers in South Africa. For the students it was another matter. With the support of two teachers, students petitioned the Institution on 12 June 1945, demanding the removal of the principal and answers to specific questions. They were given answers to their questions, but the demand for the removal of the principal was ignored.<sup>24</sup> The school instituted a Discipline Committee to deal with this and future such incidents. But by 1947, superintendent Greve was reporting that the ‘bolshevist’ spirit was no longer manifesting itself at the Institution,<sup>25</sup> that the Discipline Committee had ‘shown little sign of life’ and that there would be no harm if it died off completely.<sup>26</sup> He busied himself with building a dormitory for the girls’ hostel, worried about the shortage of space, mounting debt, the high turnover of teachers, and student rejection of the Church: ‘The Bible’, he wrote, ‘doesn’t contain the “Education” that they want’.<sup>27</sup> A massive building programme had begun.

20. *Ibid.*, 24.

21. ELM H SA acc. 76.395.2: Annual Report for the Teacher training College, Bethel, Transvaal, 1945 by H Greve, signed January 1946.

22. *Ibid.*

23. ELM H SA acc. 76.386. Minutes of the Sitting of both Mission Councils on 10 May 1945 Kruegersdrop; application by Brümmerhoff, acting superintendent of the HBM to Additional Native Commissioner Mr van Heerden at Hammanskraal, 17 May 1945; permit was granted on 6 June 1945.

24. ELM H SA acc. 76.395.2. Response to student Petition response at Special sitting of the Bethel Council at the induction of Brother Greve on 31 July. The student petition is not in the file but the response indicates that they wanted answers to the decisions of the Institution following the Circular and responses to parents.

25. ELM H SA acc. 76.395.2: Annual Report for the Bethel Training Institution, for 1945 by Greve signed January 1946.

26. ELM H SA acc. 76.395.2: Annual Report for the Bethel Training Institution for 1946 by H Greve

27. *Ibid.*



During 1946 the mission had finished two homes for teachers and had started building four classrooms, an office for the principal, staffroom and library. The hall that was burnt down in 1953 was built in 1947. With departmental help, the missionaries were planning also to create more dormitory space for boys and a space for the teaching of domestic science.

A system of student governance did exist, similar to that at other mission institutions such as Kilnerton.<sup>28</sup> A Students' Council met at frequent intervals and discussed student problems in the institution. Certain members of staff attended the meetings of this council *ex officio*. Any changes in rules and regulations were as a rule first discussed with the Students Council and thereafter announced by the superintendent or his deputy in a full assembly of all the students. If a student faced disciplinary action, a full enquiry was held into any complaints against a student (or students); the accused was present and given full opportunity to state his case and even to cross-question his accusers.

During 1948 the National Party was voted into power on its apartheid ticket. The state acted increasingly repressively towards African opposition movements even as it moved to implement its policy with immediate effect. The recommendations of the Eiselen Commission, appointed in 1947, were well known. Even though students might not have known that the Bantu Education Bill would be read two months later, state control of mission institutions had long been mooted and it was clear the state was moving in this direction. Opposition movements continued to mobilise opposition, holding mass meetings and demonstrations, and launching the Defiance Campaign on 26 June 1952. During the early 1950s tensions were also at fever pitch between the Lutheran Mission and communities in Phokeng.<sup>29</sup> Even though tight linkages cannot be drawn between these national and regional developments and what happened in the school, it is possible that they set the conditions for some form of upheaval at the institution. I found no actual evidence of networks or organisation between those in the school and outside at this time, or in the earlier periods, but incidents throughout the history of the school suggest that despite the institutional isolation, students were alive to wider currents of subaltern organisation. These general, wider conditions did not, however, explain the specific conditions within the institution that led to the fire and to which I now turn. This requires closer scrutiny.

### **Rising tensions, conflagration and immediate reactions: April–May 1953**

Against this backdrop, however, tensions began rising in the Institution in early 1953. In January, three young male scholars were suspended after coming back to school spending the night on the train drunk. One had moreover spent the evening in a compartment harassing a young girl and making 'declarations of love' to her.<sup>30</sup> Possibly more than usually sensitive to challenges to their authority, the institutional leadership began discussing tightening up disciplinary measures at the institution. But it provoked conflict between those who thought students ought to be informed and those who did not. The principal and

28. CAD, Bantoe-Onderwys (BO) vol. 84, ref. NEI/38268: Addendum to Memorandum on Bethel by GH Franz, 11.6.1953. Memorandum by GH Franz on Bethel Training Institute: Relationships between the Superintendent and teaching staff, 11.6.1953.

29. See Mbenga and Manson, *People of the Dew*, 116–122.

30. ELM H SA acc. 76.388: Letter from H Greve to O Brümmerhoff, 20 January 1953.

superintendent were on opposite sides. The surrounding community, parents and teachers were also divided on the matter.

Taken up with their own conflicts and work, the first inkling that superintendent Greve had that something was brewing in the Institution was at a Sunday service after Easter on 12 April. Small acts of disobedience suggested something was afoot. A monitor responsible for church services refused to put out benches that he normally did and students were coughing and talking throughout the service. As the students left the service, they sang and threw stones at the roof. Greve's attempted to extract an explanation from the Seniors and those responsible for the service came to naught. The next morning he discussed the matter with the student committee, who informed him that their dissatisfaction stemmed from the introduction of new regulations without their being told about them. He called a meeting of the school's Welfare Committee which accused the students of having no real complaints. He then asked the principal to call a meeting with the teachers. But Meyer simply ignored his request.<sup>31</sup> Even his superiors, to whom he wrote for advice, gave Greve cold comfort. The response was that teachers had to take greater responsibility for discipline as students' motivations in these matters were both 'political and material'.<sup>32</sup> He was advised that a meeting of the Council of Friends of the institution, consisting of representatives from Ramakokstad (near Brits), Luka (near Rustenburg), Bethanie (near Brits) and Hebron would be held soon to discuss the matter. But this was all too late.

The 14 to 17 May was a long weekend. About half the staff were away on leave. Student noisiness was noticed in the church parade on the morning of 14 May.<sup>33</sup> That evening there was a small incident in the dining room but the prefects managed to calm the situation. A reportedly tense and unruly atmosphere prevailed the whole evening, however. Just after lights out, according to one report, all the students were ordered under threat, by a small group of students, to the sports fields. The horror at what happened next for those staff at the school was described by the superintendent. Also evident in this account is the existence of differences and fissures among students:

Shortly after 11pm on the evening of the Ascension we went to bed. After about five minutes noise and shouting and howling broke out and simultaneously stones started thundering onto the roofs of the Tswana teachers. The schoolbell started ringing and in a short while the whole yard seemed to be alive. Before I could get dressed, the Seniors arrived to inform me about a revolt. Another scholar also sought protection in our house. Noise and thundering stones on the corrugated iron roofs, the shrieks of women and whistling also awoke the sleeping. It was like a bomb attack during war. Mr Peters and teacher Kgomongwe crashed into the house and commanded me to shoot. I refused, and also refused to give them my gun, but hurried to my office to inform the police by telephone. In the yard, the confusion was like a wild attack of bees. I couldn't believe that it was our scholars who were responsible for this. I couldn't get through to the police in Coligny, so I phoned Lichtenburg [...] While I was on the telephone, the light of the fire appeared over the school yard. They started by breaking the doors and windows of the houses of teachers Sephoti and Kgomongwe. Then the perpetrators divided themselves into two groups – one went to the house of the school principal [...] and set it alight. The other group was busy at the school where they set alight the Principal's office and staff

31. SA acc. 76.388: Report by H Greve: Bethel Teacher Training College Disturbances and Response to Bantu Education Act, 18 April 1953; see letter from Greve to Otto Brümmerhoff, 2 May 1953.

32. ELM H SA acc. 76.388: Letter from Brümmerhoff to Greve, 9 May 1953.

33. ELM H SA acc. 76.388: A Memorandum (n.d.) of the Interview between the H.I.N.O. and the Governing Body held after the Inquiry.



room. One classroom after the other started burning, including the school hall beside which we had our book depot. There was no possibility, as I saw it, of calling a stop to it. Mr Volker had driven to Bodenstein to fetch the police as he was of the opinion that the telephone lines had been cut. On this return, his car was stoned, such that he feared for his life. Without switching off the engine, he jumped out of the car and arrived unharmed in our house. Finally at about 12.30 pm a police car arrived from Lichtenburg, but it had to turn around to fetch reinforcements. In one hour the scholars had done their work. A few apparently went back to the hostels, the large majority to the house of Kgomongwe, who had of course fled. And then the train moved with lamps over the sports-fields to the lands of Mr Thiele. About 2 hours later they returned and went to the dining hall for boys. Shortly thereafter the police arrived.<sup>34</sup>

It was probably worse for the students. But it is clear that the incident drew a line in the sand between the authorities and students. It profoundly disorganised the missionaries and in so doing gave the state the space to insert its interpretation of events and what needed to be done.

The next day people and press streamed to the site to observe the damage. The telephone didn't stop ringing. The event was a sensation in both local and international media.<sup>35</sup>

After a week of turmoil, on 22 May, an Extraordinary meeting of the Council was held to discuss the situation. The Council decided to rebuild the Seminary, call on the Department 'for an objective investigation into the educational questions and relationships at the Seminary' and to convene a meeting of the Council of Friends to discuss the situation with them. Each student would need to reapply and each would be checked individually. A fine for the students would be discussed with the Friendship Council and a decision taken with the parents of the students. The Council of Friends, Africans associated with the church, scholars and tribal authorities, supported the institutional authority.

The Mission managed to secure a meeting with GH Franz,<sup>36</sup> Chief Inspector of Native Education in the Transvaal, a week later on 28 May.<sup>37</sup> The investigation was planned for the following week on Wednesday 3 June, with the results anticipated to be in the hands

34. Meyberg, *Gedanken & Worte*, 32–33.

35. *Ibid.*, 34; See ELM H SA acc. 76.543: letter to the brethren from W Wickert, n.d.; The Deutsche Presse Agentur, Hamburg, raised 500 DM for Bethel and transferred the amount through Mr HJ Krueger. The value in pounds was £42-12-7; ELM H SA acc. 76.388: Minutes of the Council Meeting, 1 July 1953.

36. According to 'GH Franz: An Appreciation', GH Franz was born on 30 September 1896 on the Berlin Lutheran Mission station Mphone near Houtbosdorp in the Pietersburg district, where his father was a missionary. After a period in Pietersburg, he matriculated at Boys High School, Pretoria in 1914. He then went to the Transvaal University College, Pretoria, where he obtained the BA degree and the Higher Teachers' Diploma. He began teaching in Pietersburg in August 1919 and began helping Mr JC Johns, Inspector of Native Schools at Pietersburg, with refresher courses for teachers during the years 1921–1926. In May 1926 he was appointed Inspector of Native Education at Bloemfontein, with the Free State as his circuit. Four years later he was transferred to Pretoria where he remained for the remainder of his career, except for the period 1942–1945 when he was Inspector at Pietersburg. In August 1947 he succeeded Dr W.W.M. Eiselen as Chief Inspector of Native Education in the Transvaal. After the creation of the new Division of Bantu Education Mr Franz was transferred to the Head Office of the Division, where he took charge of language problems and the preparation of teacher lesson guides. He died shortly after his retirement in Sept 1956. This is summarised from 'GH Franz: An Appreciation', *African Studies*, 16, 1 (1957), 83.

37. ELM H SA acc. 76.389.2: Letter from Saron, Phokeng to W Wickert, 28 May 1953.

of the Department no later than 6 June. The Committee would consist of four people – equal numbers of departmental and mission representatives – and would be chaired by one of the representatives who was also a member of the Department. Hearings would be held at Bethel.

### **The investigation**

Several reports were prepared based on the Investigation.<sup>38</sup> Each source provides different insights into what happened as well as the foci of interest and discourses of particular parties. For the Department, a secular interpretation is given to the events. Educational leadership and roles and responsibilities were of principal importance. For the missionaries, as illustrated in Wickert's report for the *Missionsblatt*, it was a confused mix of guilt, despair and determination not to be bowed down by the event.<sup>39</sup> Themes of the devil's work and other dark forces slumbering in African hearts and taking possession of them are counterposed with God's work and the Christian (missionary) spirit of love and forgiveness. They strongly denied racial hatred. This was a matter of Good vs Evil in which the Good would triumph. The blackened ruins of the institution were testimony of God's hand allowing Satan to beat the missionaries. He required repentance. And thus the missionaries would rebuild the institution, and the pupils and students would be readmitted after 'spiritual examination of each case' and demonstration of regret plus a monetary contribution towards rebuilding. For the missionary, this was a battle for the soul of Africa, which should not be left to dark forces.

### ***Official discourses***

The official, departmental discourses were much more mundane and saw not the hand of God or Satan but of Man at work. This was evident in the terms of reference of the Investigation, which included investigation of (i) relationships between the superintendent, the principal and staff of the institution (ii) whether these relationships had a bearing on the discipline in the institution and made a contribution to earlier or the most recent disturbances and (iii) any other aspect of the control of the institution that had a direct or indirect relationship to the earlier incidents.<sup>40</sup>

The confidential report of the Committee focused on the roles and relationships of principal and superintendent. The report concluded that while the respective responsibilities of principal and superintendent were clearly laid out on paper, they didn't work in practice. The

38. These can be found in ELM H SA acc. 76.388: Confidential report on the Commission of Inquiry; undated Memorandum of the Interview between the H.I.N.O. and the Governing Body held after the Commission of Inquiry had done its work; Report by the Chief Inspector of Native Education (ASOD), including the signed statements of all the witnesses and another official Report by GH Franz on the Relationships between the superintendent and Teaching Staff.

39. W. Wickert, 'South Africa: The Problem at Bethel' [trans] *Hermannsburgers Missionsblatt*, 93, 7 (1953), 74.

40. CAD, BO, vol. 84, ref. 1/38268: Submission from Chief Inspector of Native Education, 25 May 1953 (marked ASOD) CAD, BO, vol. 84, ref1/38268; Notice from the Secretary of the Transvaal Education Department, G Jones, n.d.: Bethel Training Institution: Commission of Inquiry.

principal felt hemmed in by the superintendent and this created tension. In the exercise of discipline the superintendent consulted with the principal while the principal acted independently of the superintendent. The superintendent didn't take full advantage of his position to exercise authority to enforce his view and this meant he acted hesitantly which had a negative impact on discipline in the institution. The students were aware of this difference of opinion and took advantage of the lax rules in place after hours and the lack of proper controls. The students were left much to themselves at the hostels. The prefect system was without proper supervision unable to function properly. The relationship between prefects, superintendent and principal was not satisfactory. There was loyalty to the principal and superintendent by the teachers except for teacher Pooe<sup>41</sup> who had been present when one Morule had been expelled. Pooe was considered to be 'very intimate' with the students and it was precisely those two teachers and the principal who had been involved in taking the decision to expel Morule whose property was damaged. The system of two principals at an institution of that kind was unsatisfactory.

The Committee's recommendations were accordingly (i) To rebuild the institution with funds from the Department; (ii) That students must reapply for admission and pay £30 upon readmission, £10 of which needed to be paid immediately and the remainder by means of stop orders; (iii) That students who refused readmission be blacklisted, i.e. not be admitted to any other institution; (iv) That everything that needed to be done to renew work in the third quarter of 1953 be done; (v) That the two-head system be ended and that the principal be appointed as the only head of the institution; (vi) That the services of teacher Pooe be terminated as soon as possible.

The Memorandum on the Interview with the Governing Body provides more specific information about the nature of the disciplinary measures that were at the root of the problem. Apparently some teachers had felt since 1950 that discipline was not what it was, especially during the free time of the students, and that improvements had to be made. But this did not happen until 1953. Then it was decided that teachers needed to be in constant supervision of students' study. Weekend activities on Saturday and Sunday evenings needed to be properly organised and placed under the supervision of teachers. Students were now also required to go to church in an orderly manner under the supervision of the teachers. At the insistence of the teachers, these regulations were not discussed with the students. All that was discussed with senior students was difficulties with discipline, but the regulations themselves were not communicated to them. The superintendent had however discussed the rules in relation to going to church with the prefects. Neither male nor female students objected to the new rules about supervision of study, but they were surprised and offended about not being told beforehand. With respect to church attendance, students felt the rule a sign of mistrust and one Sunday, when a teacher could not march them to church, 'they broke into noisy behaviour in which they even gave the Africa salute'.<sup>42</sup> When the superintendent called the prefect body together after the stone-throwing incident at the service in April, they expressed a grievance about not being informed beforehand about the new regulations. The climax was the evening of the 14th May, already described.

41. His name is spelt either as Poo or Pooe in the documents.

42. See ELM H SA acc. 76.388 (undated) Memorandum of the Interview between the H.I.N.O. and the Governing Body held after the Commission of Inquiry had done its work.

For those conducting this interview with the Governing Body, perhaps influenced in their perceptions by that body, a sense of suspicion and paranoia prevailed: it was ‘completely clear that the riots were organised by a small group of students’ who used ‘agitation’ and ‘mass hysteria’ to drag other students into the matter. It was not however possible to identify ‘the ring-leaders’. This Report also considered possible outside influences and concluded that while the superintendent and principal were not aware of any contacts with people outside the institution, one of the six teachers at the Institute ‘was under suspicion’, aware of the currents and undercurrents and himself worked in an undermining manner. Further, relationships between the surrounding Bethel community and the school were not good. It was clear that men from the community had refused to help put out the fire.

The view and judgement of the Department, in the form of G.H. Franz, was decisive. He used the situation to limit numbers of staff until enrolments had increased.<sup>43</sup> He viewed the position of the principal in a very negative light,<sup>44</sup> noting that he ‘did not have the confidence of the native parents and church community’. On 11 June he recommended that the Governing Body of the Institution be asked to give reasons why Mr Meyer should not be charged with lack of professionalism and negligence as principal of the Institution.<sup>45</sup> He argued that there was not enough evidence to charge Mr Pooe, but that he was appointed on a temporary basis and could be given 24 hours’ notice in terms of the condition of this appointment. The full weight of his displeasure was reserved for the principal.<sup>46</sup> The reasons he advanced for asking for him to be charged included his failure over a period of 17 years to draw the lack of clarity of his position to the attention of the Department; his negative attitude towards the superintendent and running of the institution as well as his failure to assist the superintendent, and allowing a situation to develop in which staff took sides. His opposition to the superintendent’s wish to make the new rules known to the students he saw as ‘inexplicable from both the education perspective as well as the perspective of reasonableness and justice [...] Under such conditions the cooperation of the students couldn’t be expected.’ The principal moreover expelled a student for an offence conducted outside of school hours and therefore technically not under his jurisdiction and without any preliminary investigation. Franz also found it ‘difficult to understand’ why Meyer did not call a meeting of teachers when the superintendent requested it, interpreting his reasons for the long delay as ‘idle excuses’ and ‘irresponsibility’. He concluded that the principal had exercised poor judgement in his attitude towards leaving everything outside of school hours to the superintendent; his attitude and uncooperative behaviour had

43. CAD BO 1/38268. Report by Chief Inspector of Native Education on Bethel Riots (marked ASOD), n.d.

44. See also ELM H SA acc. 76.388: Minutes of the Council meeting in Bethel on 30 June and 1 July 1953.

45. CAD BO, vol. 84, ref. NEI/38268: Memorandum by GH Franz on Bethel Training Institute: Relationships between the superintendent and teaching staff, 11 June 1953.

46. ELM H SA acc. 76.142.7: Another letter from Franz to Meyer, not dated, suggests that Franz’s own approach to discipline differed from that of Meyer. In this letter he comments on an incident in which the principal had dismissed six students and remarks that ‘the reasons for the dismissal [...] were certainly not satisfactory’, that ‘the punishment that was applied was disproportionately heavy – here are paying students who doubted the legality of an instruction who were punished more heavily than the teachers who draw a salary and who make themselves guilty of terrible immorality’ and that the information with which he was provided was ‘incomplete and misleading’. Under these circumstances, the Department had decided that all candidates would be admitted for the exam and that instructions to other training schools not to take up the students would be cancelled.

undermined the general disciplinary tone of the institution, and that he had made himself guilty of charges of incompetence and dereliction of duty.

### *Rights of students*

On discipline and freedom, the superintendent and principal took diametrically opposed positions. The superintendent’s approach was probably informed by his pastoral role and accountability to the Mission, that of the principal by his accountability to the Department, but appears also to have been informed by different educational principles. The superintendent’s approach was consultative and anti-authoritarian. Serious disciplinary measures, such as expulsion of a student, he always discussed with the principal. He consulted teachers through a teachers’ committee and students through the students’ council. His approach to the implementation of the new rules advocated transparency and openness as well as recognition of the right of students to be informed. Principal Meyer, on the other hand, was unequivocal about standing ‘for strict discipline and application of punishment’. He characterised the superintendent’s view as being ‘that the scholars won’t be disciplined by the rules’ and saw him as a

representative of the view that students should be given greater responsibility and that they should control themselves. By implication students should be given greater freedom to manage their affairs themselves.

Greve was not greatly disturbed by the freedom students enjoyed outside school hours and did not see a need to supervise their free time closely. These differing approaches were particularly significant when the ages of students are taken into account; the principal’s approach, of marching 30-year-olds to church for example, can be read as a form of racial paternalism.

Teachers held contrasting views. Teacher Kgomangwe identified himself with the position of the principal. He contrasted the two approaches as being that the superintendent was ‘too lenient’, rather admonishing a student for doing wrong than punishing him, whilst the principal held that a student must suffer the consequences of his wrongdoing. He personally felt that discipline had declined greatly, largely due to the lack of cooperation between various staff members, and that the students were aware of the differences on this matter between the staff. Teacher K.K. Sephoti likewise identified with the principal who he said

is strict and so am I. We both like to enforce rules and students who do not obey should be punished [...] The Superintendent differs from us in that he is more lenient.

Pooe, whose statements are characterised by opaqueness, gave nothing away, agreeing apparently with everything that was put to him. Teacher Volker, whose statement was in Afrikaans, was the only one who identified himself with the position of the superintendent on matters of discipline, ‘as it depended on cooperation with students’. Linked to this was disapproval of teachers becoming ‘too intimate’ with students as it undermined hierarchical relationships.<sup>47</sup>

47. CAD BO, vol. 84, ref. NEI/38268, Signed statement by Teacher KK Sephoti.

## The trial

What in the meantime had happened to the students? On their arrest, the students were taken to the Lichtenburg gaol. But the police cells could not hold all 184 arrested and so 80 were remanded to police cells at Elandsputte. Here they remained until the court case commenced on 5 June, while the Commission of Inquiry was conducting its investigations at Bethel. Those at Elandsputte were transported to the court in a three-quarter-tonne open truck. They had no rights to legal representation or appeal.

The students were at first undefended but then a firm from Kruegersdrop, Gladwyn, took over their defence on a pro bono basis. As the trial proceeded, the case was withdrawn against seven, and 177 finally stood trial.<sup>48</sup> Soon into the trial, the defence persuaded the trialists and representatives of the families that 50-odd should plead guilty to avoid the trial dragging on for another six months. As a result the matter was brought to a swift conclusion. Fifty-two students were found guilty of public violence, one of malicious injury to property and 124 were discharged. Sentencing varied for men and women and for those over and under the ages of 19 and 16. Thus 28 males and 3 females between the ages of 19 and 39 years were sentenced to 6 months' hard labour each. Ten males between the ages of 16 and 19 were sentenced to 9 cuts with a light cane each whereas 4 females between the ages of 16 and 18 years were sentenced to £5 or one month hard labour each. Six girls and one boy under the age of 16 were cautioned and discharged.

After the verdict, the released pupils went to the Seminary to collect their things, and the young boys were given a pass to go home, but they were given no date for their return.<sup>49</sup> The Missionary Council was disappointed with the verdict because there was no attribution of individual guilt.

## Consequences

### *Students*

In addition to the punishments meted out by the court, the Mission chose to punish the students financially. There was a long discussion at the meeting of the Council of Friends held on 3 June about the amount that returning students should be expected to pay.<sup>50</sup> In the end, the Council decided that pupils should pay £30-0-0 on readmission. The Council decided that it would raise the fees to a staggering £20-0-0 from 1954. Both the Council of Friends and the Council of the Bethel Institution agreed that students had to pay on readmission.

They also suffered in terms of education. Many scholars requested permission to go to other schools or colleges. No one who was involved in the strike or who was arrested by the police was given this permission, as it would have deprived the Mission of its compensation for the damages. Nonetheless, when the school reopened in January 1954, only 90

48. CAD, NTS, SAP, vol. 509, Ref. No 15/8/1953: Transvaal Office of the Deputy Commissioner of Police to the Commissioner of South African Police, Report on the Riot: Bethel Native Training Institution, 24 June 1953; see also Meyberg, *Gedanken & Worte*, 35

49. ELM H SA acc. 76.388: Minutes of the Council meeting in Bethel on 30 June and 1 July 1953.

50. ELM H SA acc. 76.388: Minutes of the Council meeting in Bethel on 30 June and 1 July 1953.



out of 140 reapplications were successful.<sup>51</sup> But according to reports, the spirit of the students had changed: they were obedient and cooperative both inside and outside school. As far as the mission was concerned, the heavy weather had left and the air was cleared.<sup>52</sup>

### *Withdrawal of registration and transfer*

But the Mission suffered financially. Because of the strike and the fact that there was no exam, neither fees nor exam monies were paid.<sup>53</sup> It temporarily lost its departmental registration but on appeal regained it.<sup>54</sup> Suspension of students also had financial implications as the school was funded on the basis of enrolments. Funding for renovations was made up of a donation of £258-11-7 given jointly by the then South West Africa and Deutsche Presse Agentur (German Press Agency), the recovery of an additional £1060 from students (at £10 per student), £5-5-0 from Supervisor Mokone, £13-0-0 from teachers, and £159-10-8 from the parish. By completion, there was still a deficit.

In the process of getting back onto its feet, major changes were underway in the education system. The disturbances at Bethel in 1953 provided the right conditions for the ‘restructuring’ that the Department wanted. Matric was done as part of teacher training rather than secondary schooling. The state at first claimed it wanted to turn Bethel into a teacher training college and yet it cancelled the matriculation class.<sup>55</sup> Later it became a secondary school, and the matric class was restored. In the short term, state planning played havoc with the school.

But in some respects the new plans came at the right time for the Hermannsburg mission in the Transvaal, beleaguered as it was on all sides by opposition and financial losses and constraints. It was with some joy that Heinz Dehnke wrote on 9 May after he had heard it announced on the radio that government wished to take over mission schools: ‘The solution to Bethel’, he said,

seems to be at hand [...] In that way fate comes to the mission schools [...] In any case we won’t be able to continue with the schools, as we don’t have the finances.<sup>56</sup>

The school immediately entered into negotiations with the state when the official August 1954 Circular on the Transfer of Control of Teacher Training Schools arrived.<sup>57</sup> Despite the relief that some part of the burden would be removed, the Mission still wanted a degree of influence. The Mission’s generally positive response emphasised that Bethel had grown into a ‘great unity of teacher training school, secondary school and hostels’,<sup>58</sup> and was an entirely Tswana

51. ELM H SA acc. 76.388: Minutes of the Council of Friends meeting held on 20 January 1954 at Bethel.

52. Meyberg, *Gedanken & Worte*, 41

53. ELM H SA acc. 76.395.2: Minutes of the Council meeting at Kroondal, 6 August 1953.

54. CAD BO vol. 84, ref. 1/38268: Secretary of the Transvaal Education Department to H Greve, 14 July 1953; ELM H SA acc. 76.389.2: Minutes of the College Council in Langlaagte, 11 August 1953.

55. ELM H SA acc. 76.388: Minutes of the Council of Friends meeting held on 20 January 1954 at Bethel.

56. ELM H SA acc. 76.388: Letter to Otto Brümmerhoff from Heinz (Dehnke?) 9 April 1954.

57. ELM H SA acc. 76.389.2: Letter from H Greve to Otto Brümmerhoff, Zt Ramoutsa, 11 August 1954.

58. ELM H SA acc. 76.388: Letter from Bethel Training College to the Secretary of Native Affairs, Pretoria, n.d. It was sometime after the meeting on the 8 September and probably October 1954, as the last meeting mentioned, in last paragraph, is held on 29 September 1954.

Institution with a close relationship between parents and school. The parents should thus have a say.<sup>59</sup> It thus in many ways already conformed to what the state wanted.

There was very little time for negotiation but eventually a compromise was reached,<sup>60</sup> in which the mission remained in charge of the hostels, while the buildings for teaching were rented to the Department. A person, linked to the Mission but also with the requisite professional educational qualifications, was appointed to run both the hostel as well as buildings from 1955 to 1962. Relations with the new tribal authorities were also consolidated. In 1955, Lucas Mangope, who had attained his Higher Primary Teachers' Diploma at the Institute in 1951, became Chairman of the Bethel Board and wrote to the department requesting 'more representation to the Bantu in full conformity with the Bantu Education Act.'<sup>61</sup> Born in 1923 in Motswedi, north of Zeerust, he had worked for the Department of Native Affairs between 1947 and 1949, and was 'advancing in traditional rank, having become the leader of the Mathlathlowa'.<sup>62</sup> A primary teacher in the 1940s and a secondary teacher during the 1950s, he had begun to position himself for a role within the Bantustan apparatus. The school board that was established consisted of the Rector, the Housefather, the Reverend, representatives of the parents of alumnae, the Tswana church and mission, the Tswana chief and a farmer from the Western Transvaal.

## Conclusion

The transition to Bantu Education was rapid and relatively unproblematic. In the process the state asserted its particular form of governmentality: it temporarily denied registration to the school, teachers lost their jobs, both the principal and superintendent were required to leave, and the matric class was discontinued. In this way, the events at the institution facilitated rather than hindered or blocked a change of regime.

There were distinct continuities with the past, however, in that the influence of the mission remained strong for at least another three decades. It continued to be represented on the Board, the principal and some staff continued to be drawn from a mission background, and links with the German home mission remained. The early Tswana character of which the mission was so proud, also remained intact. But there were also changes. The Chairman of the Board was no longer a religious man but Lucas Mangope, an ambitious young man earmarked for position within the Bantustan apparatus. A new chapter would open for the Institution during the Bantustan period, once Mangope had been installed as chief of the Motswedi-Barutshe-Boo-Manyane tribe and joined the Zeerust Regional Authority in 1959.<sup>63</sup> The matric class, was reintroduced in the early 1960s. With Mangope's support, approval was given for the addition of the necessary classrooms, a library and laboratory.<sup>64</sup>

59. ELM H SA acc.76.388: Letter from Bethel Training College to the Secretary of Native Affairs, Pretoria, n.d. but probably October 1954, as the last meeting mentioned in the letter was held on 29 September 1954.

60. See Voges, 'Die Arbeit im Südlichen Afrika', 298.

61. ELM H SA acc. 76.388: See letter from Lucas Mangope, Chairman of the Bethel Training College, Bodenstein, to the Regional Director of Bantu Education, Pretoria, 20 December 1955.

62. <http://www.nwu.ac.za/sites/www.nwu.ac.za/files/files/Lucas%20Mangope.pdf> accessed 8 June 2016.

63. See Meyberg, *Gedanken & Worte*.

64. ELM H SA acc. 76.694: Letter from Department of Bantu Education, Pretoria, to the principal of Bethel Training College, PK Bodenstein, n.d.

Ironically, the school would diversify significantly. By 1982, in the wake of the 1976 revolt, the largest proportion of children still came from small towns, farms and tribal areas, but 76 out of a total of 600 now also came from cities. The majority were still Tswana-speaking, but there were now many whose home-languages were Sotho, Zulu, Xhosa and a few who spoke Tsonga and Swazi.<sup>65</sup> Half the teachers were white, many of whom were wives of farmers in the area, and half were African. As before, the school had great difficulty attracting African teachers to the school on a permanent basis.

The events at Bethel in 1953 were momentous in the history of the institution but also in revealing relationships amongst the Hermannsburgers and between the mission and the Department, different approaches to discipline and freedom, and relationships between mission and students. The spark that lit the fuse was lack of consultation and communication with the students about the introduction of new disciplinary measures, an approach that must have been chafing for students who were in effect adults. There were deep divisions within the institution, different rules applying in the different sphere for which the superintendent and principal were responsible, the hostel and school. But there were also deep divisions among staff, and even among the student body. The community representatives dissented from the student action, while other members of the community appeared to support the students.

In conclusion, the article suggests that more work can be done on understanding the differentiated character of responses among missions and schools to the transition to Bantu Education. While much of the work to date has focused on the grand policy and resistance narrative, with few exceptions very little has focused on what actually went on in schools and how school actors resisted, complied, accommodated and changed. Local case studies of schools can provide insight into not only the impact of policy and broader political dynamics, but also into the invisible beliefs, pedagogies and practices that constructed internal regimes of schooling and the conditions constraining and enabling change in particular directions. The article suggests that in order to understand the legacies of both mission and Bantu Education, we need much closer examination of how this transition occurred within specific contexts. We also need much greater understanding of how local, community and traditional authorities were harnessed to different types of schools in both periods.

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65. Meyberg, *Gedanken & Worte*, 102–103.