



Eritrean children of the EPLF in Keren.

The Revolutionary Children of Eritrea

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(PTS/ translated from *Arbeiterkampf*, West German bi-weekly, September 4, 1978)

(A group of West Germans traveled through the liberated zones of Eritrea last July. When they returned to West Germany they wrote an article about the situation of children in Eritrea for Arbeiterkampf. They felt inspired by the high level of consciousness of the children and they reported on two special political projects in which the children were involved.)

After the liberation of large parts of Eritrea, the Popular Forces for the Liberation of Eritrea (EPFL) decided to devote much energy to raising the political consciousness. Education of children is a very important part of this project. The EPFL considers children equal members of society, with the same rights as adults. Throughout the liberated zones groups of the children's own organization, "Red Flowers", are promoted. The living situations of children are very different from industrialized countries, Eritrean society cannot afford to provide a different life-style for children. Children have to live with work, hunger, and bomb attacks. Eritrea is one of the poorest Third World countries, and the war presents further difficult situations. Ethiopian airplanes dropping bombs traumatize many children. They see people from their communities or even their own families tortured and shot by Ethiopian soldiers. Hundreds and thousands of children lead the lives of refugees, walking for weeks without proper food, without a permanent place to live. Many end up in refugee camps in Sudan, but the conditions there are so bad, that only the stronger ones can survive.

Children's part in the production process starts early. Little girls of five and six years have to take care of their smaller brothers and sisters. They have to help with house work, including the carrying of water and firewood. Both boys and girls have to take care of the cattle--a difficult task in a country like Eritrea, which is mostly mountains and deserts. The animals must be watched at all times because there are no fences and the loss of an animal is a tragedy for every family. The loss could mean hunger for the whole family or, if worse comes to worse, the death of the weakest family member. The work situation in the cities is not much different. Little boys try to get odd jobs, or they sell cigarettes and matches on street corners. It is difficult to get such jobs because many unemployed adults compete with the children for the same type of work. Many children die at an early age. The most common causes are: malnutrition, tropical diseases, tetanus, and death resulting from bomb attacks. Another common cause of death, especially in the rural areas, is circumcision for boys, and the removal of the clitoris for girls. The EPFL has been campaigning against these operations for a long time. The effect of the removal of the clitoris on the little girls goes beyond the physical; they recognize early that women are considered inferior human beings.

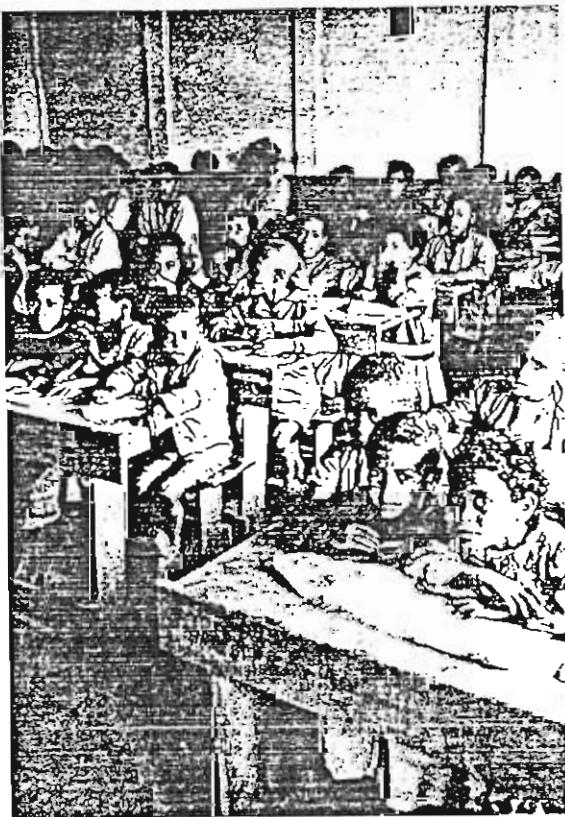
The EPFL has tried hard to make it possible for children to attend schools. During the past two years over 200 new schools were opened. But, in the countryside, even if there are schools, many families cannot afford to send their children. A change in family living situations is necessary in order for them to send their children to school. Children are an essential part in the work at home and the care of the cattle.

THE REVOLUTIONARY SCHOOL

In 1976 the EPFL founded the Revolutionary School for about 300 children. Presently 1100 children are living there, together with 50 teachers and 50 student teachers.

Comrade Nasra, in her early twenties, explained the organization of the school. It is set up like a special village for the children. They are divided into large groups according to age. Within these age groups there is a further division into smaller subgroups. Every subgroup consists of 20 to 30 children. One adult takes care of a group of 10. These grown-ups are teachers, parents, and comrades for the children. They give each child love and care and guide them through difficult situations. They also watch over the ideological developments of their group. Children are encouraged to behave cooperatively and emphasis is put on solidarity. Aggression between children is rare.

Each subgroup, including the adults, sleeps and eats together. Once a week a meeting is held, where all problems are discussed. Everything from food to curricula is on the agenda. Proposals are usually discussed until a solution has been reached. Sometimes ideas brought up by the children are considered impossible to support. Once a group wanted



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to cancel English lessons. They reasoned that English is an imperialist language, which is especially difficult to learn because of the similarity of words. Another time children demanded exclusively political education. They considered themselves fighters and felt that political education only was necessary to be good fighters.

The children who come to this school have been through many traumatizing experiences. This pressure is relieved by explaining the reasons for the war and giving instructions on how to fight and survive in this war. At first it is difficult for most of the children to get used to school life. They have to live without their families and relatives. Many are also not used to spending so much time in the open air. Every month a general is held. After that meeting, which has a similar structure as the meeting in the subgroups, the children organize a party. They build a campfire, sit around it and sing and play drums and dance. Many of the songs are composed by the children and are about their daily life and their struggle for a free Eritrea.

The school has a large library. with books in English, Tigrinia, and Tigre (the two most widely used languages in Eritrea). The EPFL has translated many of the writings of Lenin and Mao, and the school carries all these books in its library. Older students and teachers sit in the library and study late into the night.

The West Germans participated in a class for 10 to 11 year olds. They were overwhelmed by the level of political consciousness of the children. The children asked questions about West Germany, the conditions of the workers and children in West Germany, and what kind of support the West Germans give to the liberation struggle in Eritrea. When asked what they like best about their school, children gave a number of answers--from "our education is valuable for all the people of Eritrea" to "education used to be only for the rich, now the poor can afford it too."

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The schools are for the old as well as the young. EPFL organizations try to teach people of the political necessity to attend school. At the same time they have to work on improving the economic situation of the people. People are only willing to attend school, if their economic situation allows it. The goal for educational work is to eliminate illiteracy. Eritrea has a large number of skilled workers, compared to other Third World countries, but the war with Ethiopia makes it necessary to continually train more.

The Revolutionary School is a model school. New curricula are tried out, and used by other schools later on. New textbooks are published by the teachers and constantly revised. The 1100 students range in age from 3 to 15 years. 40% of them are girls. More than half of the children are from families who live in refugee camps in Sudan. Many of the children are orphans and about a third are children of revolutionaries, who died during the liberation struggle. Only 10% of the children are from a Nomadic family. Nomads are reluctant to send their children to school, because they are needed to take care of the cattle. The EPFL tries to resettle the Nomads and they put a lot of effort into educating at least one child from every family.

In former times curricula were not designed by Eritreans and fit for Eritrea's needs. US citizens were mostly responsible for educational planning and children received lessons in US and European history and geography. They never learned anything about Eritrea. On top of this, most of the lessons were given in Amharish, the main language of Ethiopia.

Now, the children have lessons ranging from languages to science; arts and crafts to sports. They also do practical work in the kit chen and garden. Sports are combined with basic military training. Children learn how to move, how to protect themselves in a military attack, what to do in case of a bombing and a basic knowledge of first aid. They also do exercises to build up their own strength.



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The teachers try to promote the individual talents and interests of every child. Weaker children are given special attention including special classes if necessary. As one teacher said: "We promote the children's creativity, and we do not have one lazy or dumb student."

RED FLOWERS IN DECAMHARE

(The Red Flower organization in Decamhare as described below is probably no longer in existence. Three weeks after the West German's visit, in July, 1978, the city had to be evacuated by the EPFL. The Ethiopian army was marching towards Decamhare and it would have been difficult for the EPFL to defend the city without losing many lives. Before the evacuation took place an underground network was organized and the West Germans are fairly certain that the Red Flower children were part of the underground network.)

When Decamhare was liberated by the EPLF in July, 1977, children started to play the game "struggle." They organized groups of "Eritreans" and "Ethiopians" and fought each other. It was their way of dealing with the problems of everyday life. EPFL discussed the need of these children to understand their situation and to raise their political awareness. On November 1, 1977, the Red Flower organization was founded. The children were entrusted with a garden close to Decamhare where everyone would have his or her tasks and responsibilities.

The garden was originally owned by Italians and was later taken over by Ethiopians. They abandoned it and when the children took it over it was in desperate condition. But within a short time they cultivated it. The children do all the work by themselves, except for some technical planning and some heavy work. Women from the political organizations help out on those two. The garden's products are sent to the front or are distributed among needy families.

The children live in the garden all day. The EPLF distributes food and the children cook it. Due to the bombings by the Ethiopians, school has to take place at night. The children return to the city in the evenings, go to their classes and then stay overnight with their families.

At first, the parents resisted the participation of their children, especially of their daughters. But the children were determined to join the Red Flowers. They stayed home during the day but they went to the evening classes. Once parents found out more about the Red Flowers, they did not hold their sons and daughters back from joining. It became an honor to be a Red Flower and it would have been easy to enlist all the children in the city. But the EPFL decided to favor a slower growth in order to give better training and education. In July, 1978, there were 75 members and 30 candidates. The West Germans were shown around the garden and invited to a general meeting at the house, which was built by the children. One of the leaders, an 11 year old, explained the 10 principles of the Red Flowers to the West Germans. The principles included: serving the revolutionary goals of unity, liberty, justice and progress; living a life where they practice solidarity and where it is possible to love each other; and fighting imperialism, feudalism, and Ethiopian colonialism. The Red Flowers concentrate their work in four main areas. Political Work - They have classes every day and meetings twice a week where they practice criticism/self-criticism. Cultural Work - They have an excellent music and theater group. Their goal is to develop a new Eritrean peoples culture based on old tradition, but created for a new society. At the first anniversary celebration of the liberation of Decamhare, which the West Germans attended, they gave several beautiful examples of their work. Economic Work - Their garden work is their contribution to the economic struggle. Military Work - They prepare against future bomb attacks by building a network of underground tunnels throughout the garden. They also receive training in running and first aid.

The Red Flowers are divided into five subgroups and each group elects its own leader. Decisions are made according to the principle of democratic centralism, and the minority gives in to the decisions of the majority. Asked if they had any problems, the answer was "no." They receive food and clothing from the EPFL and in case of bomb attacks they have their tunnel network.

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The Red Flowers were very curious about the situation in West Germany and after asking many questions, they decided to give the West Germans some advice. They asked them to pay special attention to the women's question, because only women can liberate themselves. After the discussion, dinner was served by the boys, who usually do most of the cooking.

During dinner one of the EPFL members explained the organization's interest in Red Flowers. Children have to learn to understand the positive relationship between work and revolution. The revolution takes many fighters' lives and new fighters have to be trained if the organization wants to continue its work. The work of the Red Flowers also

has an influence on other children who are not involved in the political struggle. The EPLF is not always lucky enough to have conditions like those in Decamhare. But they try where ever possible to raise the political consciousness of the children and to make it possible for them to take care of themselves.

The difficulties encountered need a lot of patience and work. The children have to gain self-reliance and learn self-responsibility. Many children were violent and undisciplined when they first joined the Red Flowers. They are mostly influenced and changed by the children of their own age group, who criticize them and support them. Children are never rejected or sent away, because ultimately, they can't be sent away from the society they are part of.

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