

Buchenwald – People’s Front in Malermagazin

NARRATOR

In his book *Gegen den Strom* (Against the Current), the Social Democrat Hermann Brill writes about the most important decision of his life:

“On March 14, 1932, I made the decision to oppose this man: everywhere, at all times, under any circumstances, and with every means at my disposal. I have since put this resolution into practice.”

The “man” that Brill is writing about is no other than Adolf Hitler.

At that time, in 1932, Hitler was required to submit to questioning before a committee of inquiry in the Thuringian State Parliament. The matter at hand was a failed attempt by the Thuringian NSDAP to grant him citizenship of the German Reich by appointing him to the civil service. Brill, who was serving in the State Parliament for the SPD at the time, chaired this committee of inquiry.

“March 14, 1932 was one of the most critical days of my life. I had heard and seen Hitler; for more than thirty minutes, he had stood before me and been obliged to answer my questions. I made a well-founded judgment of him on the basis of my own direct observation. He struck me as a hysterical brute: uneducated, cynical, thoroughly untruthful, arrogant, lacking in self-control, and ready to strike down anyone else, whether physically or morally.

Brill’s attempt to stop Hitler by parliamentary means failed. A year after the committee’s dissolution, Hitler was appointed Reich Chancellor. Brill was dismissed from public service and from then on became active in the illegal resistance. He joined the *German People’s Front* in Berlin. In 1938, he was arrested. A year later, the People’s Court sentenced him to twelve years of penal servitude for “preparation for high treason.” At the end of 1943, he was transferred to the Buchenwald concentration camp.

In Buchenwald, Brill continued his resistance work. Together with three fellow prisoners, he founded the illegal People’s Front Committee in 1944. This politically

diverse coalition focused on envisioning a new beginning for Germany following the end of National Socialism.

Committee member Johannes Brumme described his work in the committee's Special Commission for Educational Issues:

JOHANNES BRUMME

The time has now come to recount an act by the Buchenwald antifascists that may seem quite removed from the daily struggle for survival and the immediate resistance against the SS murderers, but which clearly expresses our optimistic, indomitable, and indestructible will to live and our confidence in victory.

NARRATOR

The broad-based People's Front Committee sought to lay the intellectual groundwork for politics in Germany after the anticipated collapse of National Socialism. In the process, the participants raised fundamental questions about how to achieve a democratic and socialist reorganization of Germany.

JOHANNES BRUMME

We held our meetings secretly, in the evenings, in the painters' storeroom in the cellar of the equipment shed. We also often talked one-on-one.

NARRATOR

After only a few months, the committee ceased its activities out of fear of being discovered by the SS. On April 11, 1945, the Buchenwald Concentration Camp was finally liberated by American troops. The committee member Ernst Thape wrote about the days after liberation in his diary:

ERNST THAPE

Life becomes more peaceful every day. The barbed-wire fence has been broken through in many places. Camp inmates take walks through the woods without a care.

Yet I know even now: these young Americans strolling at the edge of the German forest will one day become a very early foreign policy reality for us Germans—we who, at this moment, still stand behind barbed wire, but who, tomorrow and the day after, will have to take assume responsibility for the future of a starving and destitute Germany.

NARRATOR

Two days after Buchenwald's liberation, international socialists held an assembly. The members of the People's Front Committee also took part:

ERNST THAPE

We have just held our first party meeting. About twenty German comrades and several Austrian comrades were present, as well as a Frenchman, a Dutchman, and a Belgian as guests. Hermann Brill gave a detailed report on the preparatory work that had been done to clarify the direction of our future work.

A committee then set to work on drafting a manifesto based on Brill's lecture, including Hermann Brill himself, as well as Ernst Thape and Benedikt Kautsky. The manifesto would later become known as the "Buchenwald Manifesto":

HERMANN BRILL

We endured prison, penal servitude, and concentration camps because we believed, even under a dictatorship, that we had to work for the ideals and goals of socialism and for the preservation of peace.

NARRATOR

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HERMANN BRILL

We don't want freedom for dictators, including those who claim to act in the name of socialism. The experience of fascism taught us that every dictatorship, regardless of what banner it is under, destroys human dignity.

NARRATOR

Immediately after the end of the war, Hermann Brill was appointed by the Americans as District President of Thuringia. Shortly thereafter, however, Thuringia became part of the Soviet Zone of Occupation. Brill's advocacy for a democratic form of socialism repeatedly brought him into conflict with the Communist Party of Germany's (KPD) claim to leadership. Brill was removed from office. He was regarded as a "troublemaker" and was arrested several times.

At the end of 1945, Brill left the Soviet Zone of Occupation and continued his political work as a Social Democrat in West Germany.

