

Indoctrinating Youth



German youth attending the Reich Party Conference rally at the Zeppelin Field in Nuremberg raise their hands in the Hitler salute. Nuremberg, Germany, September 1938.

— *TimePix*



Shaping the Future: Indoctrinating Youth

“These boys and girls enter our organizations [at] ten years of age, and often for the first time get a little fresh air; after four years of the Young Folk they go on to the Hitler Youth, where we have them for another four years . . . And even if they are still not complete National Socialists, they go to Labor Service and are smoothed out there for another six, seven months . . . And whatever class consciousness or social status might still be left . . . the Wehrmacht [German armed forces] will take care of that.”

--Adolf Hitler (1938)

From the 1920s onwards, the Nazi Party targeted German youth as a special audience for its propaganda messages. These messages emphasized that the Party was a movement of youth: dynamic, resilient, forward-looking, and hopeful. Millions of German young people were won over to Nazism in the classroom and through extracurricular activities. In January 1933, the Hitler Youth had only 50,000 members, but by the end of the year this figure had increased to more than 2 million. By 1936 membership in the Hitler Youth increased to 5.4 million before it became mandatory in 1939. The German authorities then prohibited or dissolved competing youth organizations.

Education in the Nazi State

Education in the Third Reich served to indoctrinate students with the National Socialist world view. Nazi scholars and educators glorified Nordic and other “Aryan” races, while denigrating Jews and other so-called inferior peoples as parasitic “bastard races” incapable of creating culture or civilization. After 1933, the Nazi regime purged the public school system of teachers deemed to be Jews or to be “politically unreliable.” Most educators, however, remained in their posts and joined the National Socialist Teachers League. 97% of all public school teachers, some 300,000 persons, had joined the League by 1936. In fact, teachers joined the Nazi Party in greater numbers than any other profession.

In the classroom and in the Hitler Youth, instruction aimed to produce race-conscious, obedient, self-sacrificing Germans who would be willing to die for Führer and Fatherland. Devotion to Adolf Hitler was a key component of Hitler Youth training. German young people celebrated his birthday (April 20)-a national holiday-for membership inductions. German adolescents swore allegiance to Hitler and pledged to serve the nation and its leader as future soldiers.

Schools played an important role in spreading Nazi ideas to German youth. While censors removed some books from the classroom, German educators introduced new textbooks that taught students love for Hitler, obedience to state authority, militarism, racism, and antisemitism.

From their first days in school, German children were imbued with the cult of Adolf Hitler. His portrait was a standard fixture in classrooms. Textbooks frequently described the thrill of a child seeing the German leader for the first time.

Board games and toys for children served as another way to spread racial and political propaganda to German youth. Toys were also used as propaganda vehicles to indoctrinate children into militarism.

Youth Organizations

The Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls were the primary tools that the Nazis used to shape the beliefs, thinking and actions of German youth. Youth leaders used tightly controlled group activities and staged propaganda events such as mass rallies full of ritual and spectacle to create the illusion of one national community reaching across class and religious divisions that characterized Germany before 1933.

Founded in 1926, the original purpose of the Hitler Youth was to train boys to enter the SA (Storm Troopers), a Nazi Party paramilitary formation. After 1933, however, youth leaders sought to integrate boys into the Nazi national community and to prepare them for service as soldiers in the armed forces or, later, in the SS.

In 1936, membership in Nazi youth groups became mandatory for all boys and girls between the ages of ten and seventeen. After-school meetings and weekend camping trips sponsored by the Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls trained children to become faithful to the Nazi Party and the future leaders of the National Socialist state. By September 1939, over 765,000 young people served in leadership roles in Nazi youth organizations which prepared them for such roles in the military and the German occupation bureaucracy.

The Hitler Youth combined sports and outdoor activities with ideology. Similarly, the League of German Girls emphasized collective athletics, such as rhythmic gymnastics, which German health authorities deemed less strenuous to the female body and better geared to preparing them for motherhood. Their public displays of these values encouraged young men and women to abandon their individuality in favor of the goals of the Aryan collective.

Military Service

Upon reaching age eighteen, boys were required to enlist immediately in the armed forces or into the Reich Labor Service, for which their activities in the Hitler Youth had prepared them. Propaganda materials called for ever more fanatic devotion to Nazi ideology, even as the German military suffered from defeat after defeat.

In the autumn of 1944, as Allied armies crossed the borders into Germany, the Nazi regime conscripted German youths under sixteen to defend the Reich, along side seniors over the age of 60, in the units of the "Volkssturm" (People's Assault).

After the unconditional surrender of the German armed forces in May 1945, some German boys continued to fight in guerilla groups known as "Werewolves". During the following year, Allied occupation authorities required young Germans to undergo a "de-Nazification" process and training in democracy designed to counter the effects of twelve years of Nazi propaganda.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "The Holocaust." Holocaust Encyclopedia.

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005143>. Accessed on February 17, 2014.