

A Lost Generation: The Effects of Nazism of German Children 1933-45

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The effects of the Nazi regime on German children are infinitely far reaching and more often than not traumatic. Nazism entered the young lives on so many fronts that it was almost impossible as a youth growing up in Germany to escape some form of indoctrination designed by the state. State controlled youth organisations and schools are perhaps the most obvious and recognised of Hitler's methods to dominate and indoctrinate the German youth. An entire nation's childhood became so quickly centred on the philosophy and indoctrination of the Nazi regime through these various institutions of State control. The regime's drive for conformity produced further trauma for those who did not conform. I intend to outline and indicate some of the trauma which German children suffered under the Nazi regime and its immediate end.

Children were always an integral part of the social structure Hitler had planned for his Reich. Indeed, one of his more often quoted phrases "Whoever has the youth has the future"ⁱ, serves to underline the importance of youth to the Nazi regime. The Nazis realised that if indoctrination was started very early in German children's lives the Reich would be secure in that the nation's youth would mature knowing nothing but Nazism. Indeed, there were certain doctrinal aims that Hitler held for German's youth to aspire to and his party set about instilling them rapidly upon their rise to political dominance in 1933. Qualities such as obedience, loyalty to the Führer and complete conformity quickly became of paramount importance. Influences outside of State control such as the church and modern culture were suppressed in favour of schemes both approved of and run by Nazis. These included the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth, founded in 1926)ⁱⁱ and *Jung Mädels* (Young Maidens) amongst many others for varying age groups. The growth of these State controlled youth groups took on an almost predatory air through the 1930's as they so often forcibly merged other youth organisations with themselves. The Evangelical Church in Germany Youth Organisation is a major example of this, contributing around 600,000 members to the Hitler Youth. Through these youth institutions the process of mass indoctrination began to gather pace. The organisations were single sex and designed to promote the differing roles of gender in a National Socialist society.

By 1936, the Hitler Youth had just over 5 million members, with that number set to increase as membership became compulsory. As Nazism aimed for total conformity throughout German society pressure was placed not only on children to join the Youth, but also upon their parents and guardians to ensure they attended regularly. Attendance was monitored carefully and members who missed a meeting

could expect questioning and pressure from their peers. Even the parents of children absent from the Youth meetings would be questioned as to the whereabouts of their children and occasionally threatened with sanctions for their children's absence. The organisation had mutated into much more than a simple club; it provided state access to children after the school day had finished to further edify them in the Nazi ideology. This was not such an issue in the early days of the Youth however. Indeed, in the post-Wall Street Crash environment of the early thirties, young Germans saw order and activity of an organisation like the Hitler Youth in the context of their own chaotic lives. Throughout the 1930's many children began to grow disillusioned with the types of activities being offered by the Youth. An increasing amount of emphasis began to be placed on military activities such as marching and drill. The excitement felt by early members of the Youth was seemingly short lived as one former member recalls, "It was not long ...before plain-faced leaders taught us marching drill and marching songs. I hated marching..."ⁱⁱⁱ

The dislike of the growing military feel to the Hitler Youth through its activities increased, especially in the years immediately preceding and first few years of the war. The Youth at this point was a key training ground for future soldiers and the SS took a special interest in recruiting from certain sections of the organisation. The growing resentment of the Youth caused some children to form breakaway subgroups, loosely coming under the title of the Edelweiss pirates. It is difficult to really identify the exact aims of these groups, although some were most definitely political. Some established links with the KPD (the banned German Communist Party), fought with Hitler Youth Patrols and even helped in the underground resistance movement against the Nazis. The response to such groups from the authorities began as simple warnings, raids and occasional arrests. However, as membership of the 'Pirates' increased, especially in the first years of conflict, punishments became more severe. In March 1940, 130 'Pirates' were arrested in a raid. Many arrested members of the illegal organisations were sent to corrective institutions opened especially for children. Heinrich Himmler ordered a crackdown on the 25 October 1944. A group of sixteen Pirate leaders were publicly hanged in November of that year. This clearly illustrates the frustration and brutality of the Nazi regime at this point, coinciding with the Allied forces gaining the upper hand in the war.

The Nazi standard for the behaviour of the nation's children was impossibly high. Indeed, Hitler spoke in his speeches of an ideal childhood lacking "tenderness" and "weakness" in favour of "...a violently active, dominating, intrepid, brutal youth..."^{iv}. It is thus understandably inevitable that there were a certain number of youths (and also adults) who simply did not conform easily or willingly to the Nazi doctrine. To combat this, institutions such as Breitenau (a former Benedictine Monastery and adult workhouse) were opened to house children. Children were sent to institutions for a huge number of supposed crimes,

or simply for not conforming well enough amongst their peers. Living conditions in Breitenau were brutal, not helped at all by the violent and ruthless guards. Under the Nazis the guards at the institution were given revolvers for the first time, and in 1937 were allowed to shoot at unarmed escapees. Rules, work and discipline were harsh, and those found breaching them with any degree of severity could expect the punishment of solitary confinement on reduced rations, and by the war years children could be sentenced to this for up to four weeks. Many attempted escape, but in reality very few succeeded for any length of time. Much of this was due to the authorities checking escapees' homes; inevitably the first place that they would run to. Parents of escapees were warned that housing their children when they still had time to serve in the institution was a "punishable offence" and contrary to the spirit of compliance demanded by the Reich.

Many children died in such conditions; one child only a month after his being sent back to the institution after attempting escape in 1942. Disease was common amongst the inmates and many died from various illness, starvation and exhaustion. Escape was constantly on the minds of the young inmates, yet exit from Breitenau was both difficult and arduous. Boys had the option of volunteering for the forces to serve their sentence at the front as a sign of loyalty to the nation. The mental and physical torture of the sentence children had to serve at Breitenau was heightened by the fact that children did not know how long they had been sentenced to and what their release date might be. Punishment could also include the prolonging of a sentence. The institution was effectively a concentration camp for German children and theoretically was set to continue after the war had ended, holding child inmates thought to be a threat against German society.

For those in urban areas who did embrace and fit the Nazi model for children, evacuation was ordered by Hitler, on a supposedly voluntary basis, in 1940. There were two main reasons for evacuation in Germany. The first was the removal of children from dangerous areas such as large cities so as to avoid casualties and deaths in bombing raids. The second, to further the complete indoctrination of said children into National-Socialist philosophy. The social and moral re-shaping of an entire nation's youth was inexorably more attainable for the Nazis if the influence of parents was removed from the upbringing of their children. The idea of "working towards the Führer", as well as the teaching of the fatherland before family mentality, would be more effective without the natural loyalty of young children to their parents. Indeed, the Nazis wanted no one in German youth's lives who might shed equivocation on this philosophy, or even reject it completely. It is entirely certain that the removal of children from potential Allied target areas in German was for anything other than purely humanitarian reasons. The regime now finally had the opportunity to "get their hands on young people totally, in a broad context and for a

considerable period of time”. It is interesting to note also that the philosophy of strength, central to Nazi doctrine, extended as far as refusing to name the process of removal of children from cities ‘evacuation’. Indeed, the term ‘evacuation’, as used by the British, perhaps gives an undertone of retreat and was banned from use. Instead the phrase “despatch of children to the countryside” was deemed more suitable. This scheme accelerated in the years after 1940, with 5,5000 *Kinderlandverschickung* (KLV) camps being set up to house children from the ages of ten to sixteen by 1943^{vi}.

Evacuation of German children was theoretically voluntary, although many parents were heavily pressured to comply with the scheme as conditions in cities deteriorated during the war. Schools began to close as the war and bombing intensified, air raids became frequently more destructive and food shortages were felt by the urban population. Due to these circumstances many parents felt they simply had no real choice or viable alternative if they wished to cater for the safety of their young. When news and rumour of the indoctrination in every aspect of their children’s lives in the KLV camps began to filter back into cities, some parents began to complain. The children within the camps became cosseted from the outside world, ensuring their transition into model citizens of the Nazi totalitarian state.

The camps themselves were often controlled by members of the Hitler Youth. Indeed, it was a distinct aim of the Nazi education system to instil into children the ethics and theory of the leader and the led, and the racial superiority of said leader. It is one of the many dichotomies of Nazism that not only were certain children taught to emphatically obey from the outset, but also to lead and be free thinking. The *Hitlerjugend*, who had charge of children in KLV camps, often abused their power, making the lives of the evacuated children difficult and even more traumatic. Children who participated in the evacuation scheme, as well as growing up with propaganda and indoctrination in every aspect of their lives, were often subjected to further trauma through the KLV camps, where violence and ruthless actions became an everyday occurrence. The camps, away from the possible protests of parents, could engage wholly in the aim of producing young people who conformed to Hitler’s social dream; those who were not “shrinking violets...toadies or creeping hypocrites”^{vii}. Despite the trauma that German children experienced in the years immediately preceding and first few years of the war, many look back upon these days as carefree and pleasant. However, whether they were aware at the time or not, the end of the war and the years following the German defeat would prove to be highly traumatic as children became adults and struggled to adjust to life after the Reich, the Führer and the indoctrination of their youth.

The defeat of 1945 produced new sources of anguish with which German children had to cope; poverty, displacement, the advancing Russians and having to deal with a new social unknown – a society not

controlled by National Socialism. It is estimated that around 60 million Europeans were moved from their homes during the war or in the period just after^{viii}. The advance of the Russians through Germany and its wartime territories was preceded by a massive wave of fear which manifested itself often in tragic ways. A wave of suicides swept through the nation from the beginnings of 1945, including 5,000 during April and May in Berlin alone^{ix}. Seemingly, these were mostly caused by the terror people felt for the Russians and even living in a defeated Germany. The fear of the Russians was not entirely unfounded by the German population living in the East. In the first few months of the occupation, it is estimated that 10-20 per cent of women were raped and sexually abused in the capitals of Berlin, Vienna and Budapest. This wave of sexual violence must have affected children who saw it, be it their mothers, friends or themselves who were attacked. Many children who, for the most part, looked upon the Russians as liberators still admitted that "Russians violated our women and took a lot away from people."^x The attacks continued for some time afterwards, despite orders to cease attacks from the Russian High Command.

Mass poverty was also a traumatic social problem throughout Germany following the Allied victory. This was especially true for the children and families who had been evacuated during the fighting. There was no welfare system operational in Germany at this time, nor had there been one during the regime. The actions of groups such as the Hitler Youth had really been all there was in the way of welfare, with activities such as collecting scrap metal and other things beneficial to the community being key to the war effort. In defeat, the Germans had no such organisation and communities became very closed, especially in more rural areas. This meant that outsiders who had been evacuated to these areas (and financed through the government funds, now non-existent) were now destitute and surrounded by increasingly hostile local people. Often it was mothers who had responsibility for their families as their husbands and partners had been killed in conflict. For those, who did return from the fighting, adjusting to life outside of the military and the Third Reich created huge problems. Another problem was that of the so-called 'baby-farms' created by the Nazis. These institutions, full of children born for the Führer, simply could not cope with the strains of bringing up so many children without funding from the State. For a section of an entire generation of Germans, it would not be until some years later that the trauma of the Nazi regime would affect them as they searched for their original parents.

In light of the trauma and indoctrination that German children had to endure under the Nazi regime it is easier to see just how destructive the Third Reich was to an entire generation's childhood. Without detracting any of the respect that the people who were persecuted by the Nazis deserve, it is without doubt that children, who supposedly conformed to the Aryan ideal, did not mature without their own traumas. For some these manifested themselves long after the regime had ended, others have to live with the

terrible memories of institutions such as the KLV camps or Breitenau. It is important to remember that whether they supported the regime or not, Nazi children were like any children in war; innocent victims led by the indoctrination and teachings of the adults around them.

ⁱ Edward J.Kunzer, “The Youth of Nazi Germany”, *Journal of Educational Sociology*, Vol.11, No.6, The Challenge of Youth (Feb 1938), pp342-350

ⁱⁱ James Miller, “Youth in the Dictatorships”, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol.32, No 5 (Oct 1938), pp956-970

ⁱⁱⁱ Every effort had been made to identify this quote, but as yet I am unable to find the original source.

^{iv} Quoted in *Hitler Speaks*, Hermann Rausching, 1939

^v Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War*, Jonathan Cape, 2005, pp 59-79

^{vi} Guido Knopp, *Hitler's Children*, Sutton Publishing, 2000, pp 183-188

^{vii} Adolf Hitler, 1937. Cited in Guido Knopp, *ibid.* p187

^{viii} Chauncy D.Harris; Gabriele Wulker, “The Refugee Problem of Germany”, *Economic Geography*, Vol.29, No.1 (Jan 1953), pp10-25

^{ix} Nicholas Stargardt, *op cit.*, pp 320-321

^x *Ibid*, p321