Title ideas:

The generation to blame

The hitler youth and their blame

The fault of the hitler youth

*Introduction/Thesis Statement*

One of the most notorious figures of the 20th century, Adolf Hitler and his genocidal push across the European continent affected over 6 million Jews and wreaked havoc on the world at large; no one was left unscathed. Even younger generations were brought into his ploy for world domination through the Hitler Youth program. This essay will discuss whether the youth under Hitler’s control are to blame for the actions they committed in the name of their Fuhrer.

*Historical Context*

In the first quarter of the 20th century, Germany went through significant political, social and economic upheaval. After losing World War One alongside Austria, Hungary and Turkey, Germany was left in disarray. This time in Germany's history was marked by the Treaty of Versailles, the Weimar Republic and the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party. The Treaty of Versailles was created by the victors of the first world war, the Allies, it involved restrictions on Germany’s military, significant reparation payments, and territory loss. Germany was left humiliated by this treaty, and it created a fair amount of hatred for the Allies and the German government in the German people. The treaty magnified the economic crisis that Germany was facing, with a rise in unemployment and the German mark’s value significantly decreasing after World War One this left many people starving and unable to buy food. After the abdication of their Kaiser Fredrick Wilhelm II, the political system in Germany was in turmoil and introduced the Weimar Republic, which did not result in being able to help the German people. There was chaos and political unrest and while facing the Great Depression and the significant increase in inflation the Weimar Republic struggled to take hold of Germany’s political system and steer them through this turbulent time. The German people were at an all-time low, many were starving, unemployed, humiliated by their countries' defeat and had lost their sense of identity, there was a rising need for nationalism to unite the people together once more. Hitler and the NSDAP party (National Socialist German Worker’s Party), also known as the Nazi party, was one of the many rising political parties of the Weimar Republic. The NSDAP party campaigned towards the younger people, claiming that the “youth must be led by the youth” (Andre Postert), as well as preaching about the greatness of Germany, which was exactly the type of nationalism the German people wanted and needed at this time. The NSDAP party started the National Socialist Youth Organization, also known as the Hitler Youth, to spread awareness about their party and influence young people leaving childhood and entering the voting age. These youth groups were also used to create new party members and increase the political parties' numbers, by mandating that all youth who outgrew the program became a member of the NSDAP party as an adult. The NSDAP party quickly grew in popularity. Many young people were drawn to the party because they believed that the older generations were to blame for their government’s failure and the Nazi party reinforced that idea along with presenting a new scapegoat, Jews.

*Self-Serving Bias*

Before jumping further into this essay, there is something one wants to draw attention to and become aware of, this is a certain bias that pertains to this subject, which is a self-serving bias. We all “… construct self-enhancing, self-serving, egocentric biases that make us feel special – never ordinary, and certainly ‘above average’.” (pg 261) Each person possesses this bias, it’s the idea that if one were in a similar situation that you would not do what everyone else has done, because you would be an exception. The belief that we are better than everyone else is very common and not always discussed or thought about. It is human nature to carry this type of bias with oneself, it is what helps us get through life and all the hardships it has to offer. The detrimental part of this bias is that it prevents us from looking at certain situations and seeing them from an objective and impartial point of view. Take Nazism for example, many people view Nazi Germany from the lens that if they were in that situation they would not follow along, they would rebel and fight back against the Nazi’s and Hitler. This creates a rift between the reality of being in said situation and how we interpret it after the fact. One cannot begin to understand what living through Hitler’s reign must have been like without disregarding this bias. As Philip Zimbardo describes in his book The Lucifer Effect “… these biases can be maladaptive as well as blinding us to our similarity to others and distancing us from the reality that people just like us behave badly in certain toxic situations.”. (pg 261) So, for the time being please refrain from regarding the Hitler Youth through a self-serving lens, but simply from the stance that these were children, as young as 8 years old, who were brought into a system meant to manipulate and control them.

*Peer Pressure*

“Who does not want to know that she or he has been tried and found worthy of inclusion is, of ascendence into, a new rarified realm of social acceptability?” (Philip Zimbardo, pg. 259) The coercion of peer pressure coupled with the threat of rejection brought many youths under the Hitler’s command before the start of the war. Think back to one’s childhood, was it full of friends and laughter or loneliness and an acute desperation to be included. Rather on the playground or in political youth parties there’s a certain need felt by most children to be involved and a certain distance they can be pushed to prove they are worthy of involvement. “Peer pressure has been identified as one social force that makes people, especially adolescents, do strange things -anything- to be accepted.” (The Lucifer effect, pg258-259) During the early 1920’s the Hitler Youth was just one of many political youth groups, each designed to create and produce miniature politicians for each parties' campaign. Similar to school clique’s, the groups created division among the youth and left those without a program in the dark. In Philip Zimbardo’s book the Lucifer Effect he details a phenomenon that C.S Lewis describes in his novel, called the “Inner Ring”. It is a theory that in society we often exist in ascending social circles, the outer rings being those who are deemed less popular or less cool by the majority. Whereas the so called “Inner Ring” is where the best of the best reside. C.S Lewis talks about how in younger people the lines between these circles are much more predominant and harder to cross. There is a certain amount of pressure among youth to transcend these circles and make it closer to the center, but to head towards the center one must be trialed and deemed worthy by the Inner Ring. Being a part of these youth groups was often seen as a badge of honour and the youth group leaders grabbed up the willing participants for their own means. This desire to fit in and be closer to the Inner Ring was a presiding aspiration among youth and enables authorities, like Hitler, to draw in mass groups of youth by offering a step up in society and ultimately coming closer to the Inner Ring. “Authorities can command total obedience not through punishments or rewards but by means of the double-edged weapon: the lure of acceptance with the threat of rejection.” (Philip Zimbardo, pg. 259) The need for acceptance among our peers can often lead us astray, and in the case of the Hitler Youth group it led many young people down a very dark and unforgiving path.

*What they were taught/their education*

When a teacher, leader or trusted adult in your life teaches you violence and hatred, how do you say no, how do you remain untouched by their influence; that is the question faced by the Hitler Youth, many of which could not come up with an answer and did as they were told. In Germany during the 1920’s to 1930’s Hitler slowly started seizing control of the government and had successfully distorted the government and educational system. Hitler knew that the best way to control Germany and ensure Nazism’s future was through the next generation. The older generations were less malleable to Hitlers commands, they had long been acquainted with the world and formed their own opinions of it. “With youth, however, the situation is different, with them they can be built from the ground up.” (Nazi Primer, pg. 3) The transformed education system and the Hitler Youth program worked hand in hand to mold the next generation of Nazis. During the 1920’s he was simply another political leader but going into the late 1930’s he had started modifying the German school system and by 1937 there was a standardized curriculum within the education system and the Hitler Youth program. (Andre Postert) The book the Nazi Primer was an important text for the education of the youth, it was written by a group of socialist scholars in the hopes to educate the youth. It taught “... a range of racist subject matter –genetics, eugenics and racial laws.” (Andre Postert) The teaching points for the Hitler Youth was antisemitism, blood purity, physical fitness and military knowledge.

ANTISEMITISM

The Nazi Primer talks extensively about several different races that are spread out across Germany and the surrounding areas, they distinguish these races through trivial physical details, “... take into account above all things size and shape of body, skull, color of hair, the eyes and the skin, as well as the texture of the hair.” (Nazi Primer, pg. 15) to highlight the superiority of the Aryan race. They taught the youth to be very proud of their Aryan race. “...how sacred was their Aryan race how great their ancestors had been, and how much of Europe properly belonged to the Fuhrer and his followers.” (Nazi Primer, pg. 268) and even went as far to say that people of different races did not have the same kind of soul, deeming non-Aryan's to have undeserving souls, undeserving of life even. The Nazi Primer claimed that Aryans were strong, mentally and physically, they were adept intellectually and were unstoppable beings who were superior to all the rest. Compared to the Aryan’s, the Jews were dirty and undesirable, they were blamed for the economic failure in Germany and the Nazi Primer stated that to save Germany they needed to “...remove the Jews from the cultural and economic life of our folk.” (Nazi Primer, pg. 78) Hitler went as far as to create a conspiracy theory that international Jewry was trying to enslave the German people and drilled it into the minds of the youth, claiming that Hitler and themselves were the only possible saviour for the German people.

BLOOD PURITY

The Nazi Primer used the **Mendelian Law** to back up many of their scientific claims about blood purity, claiming that over the years Aryans have unknowingly bred with undesirables which has cause their superior blood to be diluted and dirtied. To preserve the current purity of their blood Hitler, forbid marriage with Jews and anyone else deemed unworthy. In 1933 the Nazis even went as far as compulsory medical sterilization to stop the spread of undesirable blood. Although this was an atrocious act of God committed by the hands of the Nazi’s they claimed it was “... founded on a deep humanitarianism.” (Nazi Primer, pg. 78) and was the only way to save their Aryan race from further damage and to prevent the spread of diseased peoples.

PHYSICAL FITNESS and MILITARY KNOWLEDGE

Hitler knew that a war was coming and was actively preparing for it, one of the ways he did this was to strongly encourage physical fitness and military knowledge. Believing that intelligence only comes from physical strength and the bodily health of the youth became a concern of the state. Activities such as boxing, javelin throwing, strength training, rowing, horse riding, and many more sports were offered and mandated by the Hitler Youth. The Hitler Youth also organized large sports festivals to show off their many talents and further encourage physical training. Over 500,000 boys and girls participated annually, and it drummed up much popularity for the political party. On top of physical fitness which went hand in hand with intellectual fitness, a keen adeptness for military knowledge was required by the Hitler Youth. The program taught marching, shooting, battle strategy, how to throw grenades and survival skills in the wild. “The rifle is the bride of the German soldier” (Hitler Youth, pg.228-229) One of the essential skills that the program taught was self-sacrifice, which was deemed an essential skill by Hitler. He believed that every soldier should be prepared and willing to offer up their own lives for their country. In the end, Hitler had essentially created a second army that he could call upon and during the first few months of the war alone 1,091,000 Hitler Youth were called to join the fight.

MANIPULATION OF EDUCATION

Hitler had effectively altered the education system of Germany, and one’s self-serving bias may be questioning why none of the children questioned these changes but let one attempt to shed light on this perspective. As young children, one often questions the world around them and asks why the sky is blue, and one’s teachers may reply that is just how the world works, without divulging the complicated science behind the question. One takes their word at face value because they are one’s teachers, they are who one is supposed to trust and rely on. When one is taught science, history and math in school one does not stop to question the instructor on their sources or where they got their information; and neither did the German youth. As the German youth were learning about Hitler's version of history or about how the Jews are to blame for all of Germany’s problems, no German child spoke out against their teachers or professors because what would make the children not trust their teachers? Hitler had ensured total control over all external influences and had dismissed any teachers or professors that would not bend to his will. He also persecuted preachers that did not preach about Nazism and had altered every aspect of the educational system to serve his goals. For the youth this way of life was all they knew, “We who were born into Nazism never had a chance unless our parents were brave enough to resist the tide and transmit their opposition to their children” (Memory, family and self...) They had successfully steeped a generation in Nazism, self-sacrifice, and antisemitism, creating the ultimate weapon for Hitler, a generation all to his own, one he could manipulate and bend to his will. If they did not conform to these standards the regime threatened future employment and school opportunities as well as their family's safety and wellbeing there was no other option but to abide by the Nazi’s rule. Throughout this education, one might think that parents should intervene, but the Nazi Primer makes it clear that “...the children belong to the state and party, not their families.” (Nazi Primer, pg. 268) They molded kids into smart, fit, self-sacrificing robots “... make the rising generation worship their chief and get ready to ‘save civilization’ from the Jews, from Communism, and from democracy.” (Nazi Primer, pg.280)

*Their loyalty*

Once brought into the Hitler Youth, the adolescents were molded into loyal subjects of Hitler and Nazism; and when the Weimar Republic started persecuting the Hitler Youth for its radicalism the youth clung to their program and started their streak of violence.

“It is a history of bold dreams of social liberty and individual independence being ultimately squeezed into the framework of tight and militant organization, a history that leads from the extremes of individualism to the extreme of militancy.” (Hitler Youth, pg. 19)

Germany is an example of how desperation can push people to do crazy, erratic things, such as violence and brutality. At the time the Hitler Youth was not the only youth program around, many political parties were targeting the youth to promote their party and increase their numbers. QUOTE ABOUT HOW YOUTH ARE THE FIRST TARGET OF THE GOVERNMENT.

In the 1920’s the Hitler Youth grew steadily, constantly increasing in size and spreading across Germany and it later expanded to include the League of German Girls. In 1926 there were about 700 boys involved in the Hitler Youth and by 1929 they had grown to 13000. Many youths felt connected with other, like-minded people for the first time and felt they were making a change in their government. They participated in “...evening gatherings at private homes, camping trips and discussion groups...” (Andre Postert) The youth believed they were fighting back against the oppression of the Jews. The loyalty to the Hitler Youth program grew on its own but was also reinforced by the leadership of the program. “The Hitler Youth was to obey any command issued by the party leader...” (Hitler Youth, pg. 65) The oath that every young boy and girl were required to make before joining the party was as follows “I promise, In the Hitler Youth, To do my duty, At all times, In love and faithfulness, to help the Fuhrer, so help me god.” (Hitler Youth, pg. 112) and all Hitler Youth, boys and girls were required to live by the rules that Hitler created.

1. The Leader is always right.
2. Never violate discipline
3. Never waste time in idle chatter, nor in self-gratifying criticsim, but take hold and help.
4. Be proud but not arrogant.
5. The program is your dogma; it demands your complete surrencer to the cause.
6. You are a representative of the aprty; govern your appearance and behaviour accordingly.
7. Loyalty and unselfishness are the first commandments.
8. As a true socialist you must be a real comrade.
9. Do to your comrades as you would have them do to you.
10. In battle be steadfast and discreet.
11. Courage is not recklessness.
12. Whatever serves the interest of the movement, and through it Germany and the German people is right.

(Nazi Primer, pg 13-14)

In the early 1930’s the Weimar Republic started to crumble, throwing the country into distress and turmoil once more. There was a significant increase in hatred towards the many youth groups but especially towards the Hitler Youth for their lack of collaboration with other youth programs. In 1930 the Weimar Republic banned all pupils from secondary school and trade schools from joining the Hitler Youth, but this ban ended up failing to deter the youth from joining the Hitler Youth and enticed more to join. There was a spike in recruitments and the Leadership of the Hitler Youth turned this ban into propaganda for themselves. In 1932 the group had increased to 70,000 boys and 15,000 girls. The Hitler Youth started organizing rallies and meeting under alias group names to escape government intervention. They believed they were being “...persecuted for what in their view were not simply party-political reasons but because of their patriotism.” (Hitler Youth, pg. 76) The youth clung to their program, adamantly loyal and determined to continue serving as Hitler Youth and spread the word of their Fuhrer. The persecution from the government during Hitler Youth rallies became crucial in further pushing the youths into Hitler’s arms. Starting as peaceful rallies, meant to show that their voices could not be silenced, turned into violent massacres, with boys being shot, injured, heavily fined, killed, beaten and imprisoned, the youngest Hitler Youth killed was about 12 years old. Many boys who returned from jail came back as martyrs for the cause, furthering the frenzy for the Hitler Youth. No amount of government intervention would make these boys and girls give up their beliefs, they had been indoctrinated into the program and believed that they needed to save Germany from the Jews. The persecution from the government furthered their belief that the Jews had infiltrated the government and this tyrannization was trying to suppress them. The Hitler Youth became a force to be reckoned with and helped further Hitler’s campaign for power, in 1938 the group had grown to 8,700,000 boys and girls. Bands of boys and girls would travel across the countryside singing anthems about the glory of their Fuhrer and spreading the word of Hitler.

*The acts they committed*

As the political climate began to heat up and war was on the horizon, the Hitler Youth became more erratic and violent in their outbursts, encouraged by their program leaders. In the tail end of the 1930’s the Hitler Youth were a strong, vast network of boys and girls devoted to Hitler, having been taught and raised on his ideologies from a young age. The German youth felt a sincere duty to their country, to protect it from the Jews and they knew their time was soon and they would rise at Hitler’s call. Although ready for when their Fuhrer would call on them some boys had become impatient and took matter into their own hands. Gangs of young boys, and a few girls would organize boycotts of local Jewish stores, and would even go as far as standing in front of shops to not let people in. The youth learned this was an effective tactic and harmed the Jewish owner’s business, so they took it a step further and started vandalizing Jewish stores, breaking store windows and threatening Jewish business owners. The next step was desecrating Jewish cemeteries and physically assaulting Jewish civilians in the street. Even non-Jewish civilians were subject to the violence of the Hitler Youth if they were deemed a Jew supporter. This violence persisted across Germany, led by gangs of boys believing it was their civic duty to wipe out the Jews for the sake of their country. “Justified it as reactions to an infection that sought to slip into the body of the German nation.” (Andre Postert) It didn’t take long for the public to bring this problem to the attention of the program leaders, the public demanded they stop the violence and reprimand the boys. Alas, there were little to no consequences for the actions of the Hitler Youth and many were encouraged to keep doing it but to just be more discreet, to not hurt the programs image. In November of 1938, the Hitler Youth had long been steeping in their Nazi ideology and on November 9th the murmur of violence came to a screeching explosion, the Night of Broken Glass. The day before, whispers of violence and brutality against the Jews was passed through the ranks of the Hitler Youth, their leaders informing them that the Nazi regime was coordinating a brutal attack on the Jews, and they were encouraged to watch and join if they wished. Their leaders informed them that “The Jews need not expect any mercy and can be harmed.” (Andre Postert) Encouraged by their leaders, many Hitler Youth could be seen singing songs, shattering windows and lighting buildings on fire beside their regime brethren; they assaulted Jews and committed many atrocities that night. The Hitler Youth had broken glass on their hands.

*Aftermath*

“After Auschwitz there can be no more poetry.” (Hitler Youth, pg. 253)

In the aftermath of the war, an entire generation was abandoned, having been led astray by their system, their beliefs, and their leader, their entire lives leading them in the wrong direction. When the Allies took back Europe and emancipated the continent from Hitler’s grasp the Hitler Youth were deserted by their leader’s, ripped away from their belief system and cast aside. They were “a youth surrounded by broken symbols and discredited ideals...” (Hitler Youth, pg. 253) When the truth behind the Nazi regime was revealed the Hitler Youth were confronted with the reality of their actions and just how horrible the Jews were treated they were left to fend for themselves in an uncaring world that was vastly different than the one they were raised in. Their entire identity had been built around protecting Germany from the Jews and serving their country, and the Hitler Youth program “...provided an institutional framework and lent legitimacy to self-empowerment and the use of force.” (Andre Postert) but suddenly it was all a lie. Many Hitler Youth turned to education, attending universities in other countries and questioning every piece of information they learned, professors often commented that they had never seen a generation so serious about their education. The Hitler Youth learned to cope with the betrayal of their Fuhrer and forge their own path in the world, untainted by political propaganda and blind hatred.

*Conclusion*

In conclusion, the question of whether the Hitler Youth are to blame for their actions under the influence of Hitler’s regime is complex and tedious and one must factor in the broader societal backdrop of the early 20th century in which they lived. The period after the First World War was filled with political turmoil, economic despair and instability, creating the perfect opportunity for Hitler to latch onto the minds and hearts of the youth. The Hitler Youth program alongside the manipulated education system allowed Hitler to shape Germany’s youth into young Nazis and fabricate loyalty to himself and the regime above all else. Coupled with the desire to fit in reinforced the youth's allegiance to Hitler and the regime. The Hitler Youth became a useful propaganda tool for Hitler were used to spread his ideologies and safeguard the future of Nazism in Germany. The Hitler Youth were encouraged to hate Jews and were spurred into violent outbursts towards anyone who stood in their way. While some members of the Hitler Youth most likely embraced this ideology more than others it is hard to deny that the vast majority were victims of a system that was carefully created to manipulate and control young people.

In the end, while none of the Hitler Youth can be completely forgiven for their transgressions it is important to acknowledge the complexity of their situation and to disregard our self-serving bias to understand their situation. The story of the Hitler Youth is an important narrative about the power the government holds over children’s education and just how malleable the youth are.

We want to be a peace-loving people, but at the same time courageous. That is why you must be peaceful and courageous at the same time. We want our people to be honour-loving; to that end you must from earliest childhood learn the conception of honour. We want to be a proud people, and you must be proud; proud to be the youthful members of the greatest nation. We want an obedient people, and you must learn to practise obedience. We want a people that is not soft but hard as flint, and we want you from yout to learn to overcome hardships and privations. There must be no classes or class distinctions among our people, and you must never let the idea of class distinctions take root among you. We shall pass on, but Germany will live in you. - Adolf Hitler

(Hitler youth, pg. 105)

Bibliography

Brennecke, Fritz, et al. The Nazi Primer : Official Handbook for Schooling the Hitler Youth. New York: AMS Press, 1972.

Koch, H. W. The Hitler Youth : Origins and Development, 1922-45. London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1975.

Matzer, Lisbeth. “Be(com)ing “German”. Borderland Ideologies and Hitler Youth in NS-occupied Slovenia”. Taylor and Francis Online. 36(2), 181-199.

Plum, Catherine J. Antifascism After Hitler : East German Youth and Socialist Memory, 1949-1989. London: Routledge/Taylor Francis Group, 2015.

Postert, Andre. “’Isolated actions against non-Aryans are to be strictly discontinued’ The Hitler Youth and violence against Jews”. Taylor and Francis Online. 27(3), 408-427.

Sahrakorpi, Tiia. “Memory, Family, and the self in Hitler Youth Generation Narratives”. Sage Journals. 45(1), 88-108.

Zimbardo, Philip G. The Lucifer Effect : Understanding How Good People Turn Evil. New York: Random House, 2007.