

The Hitler Youth: A Generation of Guilt

By

Taryn Cail

Prof. Dr. Cheryl Fury

HIST 2102

February 26th, 2024

One of the most notorious figures of the 20th century, Adolf Hitler and his genocidal conquest across the European continent killed over 6 million Jews and wreaked havoc on the world at large. Even the young people of Germany were brought into his ploy for world domination through the Hitler Youth program. The Nazi Primer, the official handbook for the Hitler Youth, details the curriculum for the program. The handbook contains antisemitism ideologies and a strong emphasis on fighting back against the Jewish population. This resulted in the Hitler Youth committing countless horrifying deeds against the Jews. This essay will discuss how the youth under Hitler's control are not to blame for the actions they committed in the name of their Fuhrer.

In the first quarter of the 20th century, Germany went through significant political, social, and economic upheaval. 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. This treaty involved restrictions on the size of Germany's military, reparation payments, and territory loss. Germany was left humiliated by this treaty, and it created feelings of resentment towards the Allies and the German government in the people. The treaty magnified the economic crisis that Germany was facing. With a rise in unemployment and the German mark's value significantly decreasing, many people were left starving and unable to buy food. After the abdication of their Kaiser Fredrick

Wilhelm the II, the political system in Germany was in turmoil and thus the Weimar Republic was introduced. Trying to deal with the Great Depression and hyperinflation, it became increasingly difficult for the Weimar Republic to enact new government policies and govern Germany. The German people were at an all-time low. People were starving, unemployed, humiliated by their country's defeat and had lost their sense of identity.¹ There was a rising desire for nationalism to unite the people together once more. Hitler and the NSDAP (National Socialist German Worker's Party), also known as the Nazi party, was one of the many rising political parties of the Weimar Republic.² The NSDAP campaigned towards the younger people, claiming that the "youth must be led by the youth"³ as well as preaching about the greatness of Germany, which was exactly the type of nationalism the German people wanted at this time. The NSDAP party started the National Socialist Youth Organization, also known as the Hitler Youth, to promote their party and influence young people entering the voting age. The youth group was also used to create new party members and increase the parties' numbers, by mandating that all youth who outgrew the program became a member of the NSDAP party as an adult.⁴ 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 after WW1 and the Nazi party reinforced that idea, along with presenting a new scapegoat: Jews.⁵

When a teacher, leader or trusted adult in your life teaches you violence and hatred, how do you remain untouched by their influence; that was 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

¹ H.W. Koch, The Hitler Youth: Origins and Development, 1922-45 (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1975), 19.

² Ibid., 19.

³ Andre Postert, "'Isolated actions against non-Aryans are to be strictly discontinued' The Hitler Youth and violence against Jews", Taylor and Francis Online 27(3), 409.

⁴ Koch, The Hitler Youth, 20.

⁵ Ibid., 20.

the 1920s to 1930s Hitler started seizing control of the government and had successfully distorted the education system. Hitler knew that the best way to control Germany and ensure Nazism's future was through the next generation.⁶ The older generations were less malleable to Hitler's command, 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."⁷ During the 1920s Hitler was simply another political leader but going into the late 1930s he had started modifying the German school system. By 1937 Hitler had implemented a standardized curriculum across the education system and the Hitler Youth program.⁸ The transformed education system and the Hitler Youth program worked hand in hand to mold the next generation of Nazis. The book, *Nazi Primer* was an important text for the education of the youth, it was written by a group of socialist scholars. It taught "... a range of racist subject matter –genetics, eugenics and racial laws."⁹ The teaching points for the Hitler Youth was antisemitism, blood purity, physical fitness, and military knowledge.¹⁰

The *Nazi Primer* teaches 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."¹¹ 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."¹² The book even goes as far

⁶ Koch, *The Hitler Youth*, 65.

⁷ Fritz Brennecke and others, *The Nazi Primer: Official Handbook for Schooling the Hitler Youth* (New York: AMS Press, 1975), 3.

⁸ Postert, "Isolated", 410.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 410.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 411.

¹¹ Brennecke and others, *The Nazi Primer*, 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 268.

to say that people of different races do not have the same kind of soul, deeming non-Aryan's to have souls undeserving of life.¹³ 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 Aryans, the Jews were allegedly 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."¹⁴ Hitler went as far as to create a conspiracy theory that international Jewry was trying to enslave the German people and claimed that Hitler and themselves were the only possible saviours for the German people.¹⁵ This created a sense of urgency within the Hitler Youth, that they needed to act and fight back against the Jews that were trying to take over Germany.

The Nazi Primer uses pseudo-science to back up many of their scientific claims about blood purity, claiming that over the years Aryans have unknowingly bred with undesirables which has caused their superior blood to be diluted and dirtied.¹⁶ To preserve the current purity of their blood, Hitler forbade 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.¹⁷ 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."¹⁸ and was the only way to save their Aryan race from further damage and to prevent the spread of diseased peoples. ¹⁹ These ideas

¹³ Brennecke and others, The Nazi Primer, 19.

¹⁴ Ibid., 78.

¹⁵ Koch, The Hitler Youth, 117.

¹⁶ Brennecke and others, The Nazi Primer, 78.

¹⁷ Ibid., 78.

¹⁸ Ibid., 78.

¹⁹ Ibid., 268.

furthered resentment towards Jews in the Hitler Youth by fabricating scientific facts to back up the notion that Jews were evil and needed to be destroyed.

Another key teaching point for the Hitler Youth was to encourage physical fitness and military knowledge. Founded on the idea that intelligence comes from physical strength, the bodily health of the youth became a concern of the state.²⁰ 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 annual 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.²¹ A keen adeptness for military knowledge was also required by the Hitler Youth. The program taught marching, shooting, battle strategy, how to throw grenades and survival skills in the wild.²² The physical fitness and military knowledge encouraged comradery among the Hitler Youth. By participating in teams sports and cheering on their peers, the Hitler Youths loyalty to their program continued to strengthen, anchoring them to their leaders and the ideals they taught.²³

Hitler had ensured total control over all external influences, which minimized the youths ability to learn anything else but what Hitler wished. Hitler had dismissed any teachers or professors that would not bend to his will as well as preachers that did not worship Nazism. Hitler had altered as many aspects of the education system as possible to serve his goals.²⁴ 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

²⁰ Koch, *The Hitler Youth*, 164.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

²² *Ibid.*, 166.

²³ *Ibid.*, 166.

²⁴ Lisbeth, Matzer, “Be(com)ing “Memory, Family, and the self in Hitler Youth Generation Narratives”, *Sage Journals* 45(1), 191.

their children”²⁵ 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.²⁶ There was no other option but to abide by the Nazi's rule. Throughout this education, parents were not permitted to intervene, the Nazi Primer makes it clear that “...the children belong to the state and party, not their families.”²⁷ They molded kids into smart, fit, self-sacrificing robots and made “...the rising generation worship their chief and get ready to ‘save civilization’ from the Jews, from Communism, and from democracy.”²⁸

Once brought into the Hitler Youth, the youth were molded into loyal subjects of Hitler and Nazism; taught by the Nazi Primer, they would follow any command given, even horrific commands of 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.²⁹ In the 1920's the Hitler Youth grew steadily, constantly increasing in size and spreading across Germany, it even grew to include the League of German Girls. In 1926 there was about 700 boys involved in the Hitler Youth and by 1929 they had grown to 13,000.³⁰ They participated in “...evening gatherings at private homes, camping trips and discussion groups...”³¹ 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.

²⁵ Tiia Sahrakorpi, “Memory, Family, and the self in Hitler Youth Generation Narratives”, *Sage Journals* 45(1), 88.

²⁶ Koch, *The Hitler Youth*, 78.

²⁷ Brennecke and others, *The Nazi Primer*, 268.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 280.

²⁹ Matzer, “Be(com)ing”, 189.

³⁰ Koch, *The Hitler Youth*, 73.

³¹ Postert, “Isolated”, 410.

“The Hitler Youth was to obey any command issued by the party leader...”³² The oath that every young boy and girl was required to make before joining the party was as follows “I promise, In the Hitler Youth, to do my duty, at all times, an love and faithfulness, to help the Fuhrer, so help me god.”³³ 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 criticism, but take hold and help.
4. Be proud but not arrogant.
5. The program is your dogma; it demands your complete surrender to the cause.
6. You are a representative of the party; 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.³⁴

In the 1930s the Weimar Republic started to crumble, throwing the country into distress and turmoil once more. There was an increase in hostility towards the many youth groups, due to their politicization of the youth, but especially towards the Hitler Youth for their lack of collaboration with other youth programs.³⁵ The Weimar Republic started persecuting the Hitler Youth for its radicalism, in turn the youth clung to their program and continued their streak of violence.³⁶ In 1930 the Weimar Republic banned all pupils from secondary school and trade

³² Koch, The Hitler Youth, 65.

³³ Ibid., 112.

³⁴ Brennecke and others, The Nazi Primer, 13-14.

³⁵ Koch, The Hitler Youth, 74.

³⁶ Ibid., 74.

schools from joining the Hitler Youth. This ban ended up failing to deter the youth from joining the program and in turn enticed more to join.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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.”³⁹ The youth clung to their program in the face of defiance and became adamantly loyal and determined to continue serving as Hitler Youth. 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.⁴⁰ 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 fully indoctrinated into the program and believed that they were the only ones who could save Germany from the Jews. The persecution from the government furthered their belief that the Jews had infiltrated the government and were trying to stop them.⁴¹ 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 the Hitler Youth would travel across the countryside singing anthems about the glory of their Fuhrer and spreading the word of Hitler.⁴²

³⁷ Koch, The Hitler Youth, 75.

³⁸ Ibid., 75.

³⁹ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 76.

⁴¹ Ibid., 76.

⁴² Ibid., 112.

The debate surrounding the actions of the Hitler Youth brings up a bias that should be addressed, which is self-serving bias. A self-serving bias is the idea that if one were in a similar situation that one would not do what the majority has done, because one would be an exception, “... 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.”⁴³ The detrimental part of this bias is that it hinders the ability to look at certain situations and see them from an objective point of view. In the case of the Hitler Youth and Nazism, it is often the opinion that if one were in a similar situation one would not follow along. This creates a rift between the reality of being in said situation and how it is interpreted. One cannot begin to accurately understand what living through Hitler’s reign might have been like without disregarding this bias. Now while reviewing the more nefarious actions of the Hitler Youth, disregard the self-serving bias and view this history from the stance that these were children, as young as eight years old, who were brought into a system meant to manipulate and control them.

As the political climate began to heat up and war was on the horizon, the Hitler Youth only became more erratic and violent in their outbursts and were encouraged by their program leaders. In the tail end of the 1930s 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. Although ready for when their Fuhrer would call on them, some boys had become impatient and took matters 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 physically stop civilians from entering.⁴⁴ The youth learned this was an effective tactic and harmed the Jewish

⁴³ Philip G. Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2007), 261.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 261.

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.⁴⁵ 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."⁴⁶ 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. There ended up being little to no consequences for the actions of the Hitler Youth and many were encouraged to continue their streak of hatred but to be more discreet so as to not hurt the programs public image.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ Their leaders informed them that "The Jews need not expect any mercy and can be harmed."⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ The Hitler Youth had broken glass on their hands.

⁴⁵ Postert, "'Isolated", 413.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 413.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 414.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 414.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 415.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 415.

Peer pressure is a force that many individuals confront in their lives, and it was a key factor in many adolescents choice to join the Hitler Youth organization. “Who does not want to know that she or he has been tried and found worthy of inclusion is, of ascendance into, a new rarified realm of social acceptability?”⁵¹ The coercion of peer pressure coupled with the threat of rejection by their peers brought many youths under Hitler’s command before and throughout the war. Rather on the playground or in political youth parties there’s a desire felt by many children to be accepted by ones peers. “Peer pressure has been identified as one social force that makes people, especially adolescents, do strange things -anything- to be accepted.”⁵² During the early 1920s the Hitler Youth was just one of many political youth groups, each designed to create and produce miniature politicians for each parties' campaign. Like school cliques, the groups created division among the youth and those without a program were looked down upon. In Philip Zimbardo’s book the Lucifer Effect, Zimbardo develops upon C.S Lewis’s phenomenon called the “Inner Ring”. It is a theory that society exists in ascending social circles like rings, creating a shape like the inside of an onion. These rings have larger rings on the outside and smaller rings on the inside. The outer rings contain people who are deemed less popular by the majority, and progressing inwards contains those who are continuously more popular, as dictated by society.⁵³ At the center of the rings is the so called “Inner Ring” which 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 prominent 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 tested

⁵¹ Philip G. Zimbardo, The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil (New York: Random House, 2007), 259.

⁵² Ibid., 258-259.

⁵³ Ibid., 258-259.

and deemed worthy by the Inner Ring.⁵⁴ Being a part of these youth groups was often seen as a badge of honour and made children who were in the program feel above the rest, granting them a spot closer to the Inner Ring. This desire to fit in and be closer to the Inner Ring is 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.⁵⁵ “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.”⁵⁶ Once drawn into these programs, the youth were indoctrinated into Nazism and were brought under Hitler's command. 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.⁵⁷

In the aftermath of the war, an entire generation was abandoned, having been led astray by their system, beliefs, and 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...”⁵⁸ When the truth behind the Nazi regime was revealed the Hitler Youth were confronted with the reality of their actions and were left to fend for themselves in an uncaring world that was vastly different than the one they were raised in.⁵⁹ Their entire identity had been built around protecting Germany from the Jews and serving their country. The Hitler Youth program had “...provided an institutional framework

⁵⁴ Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*, 259.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁵⁸ Koch, *The Hitler Youth*, 253.

⁵⁹ Catherine Plum, *Antifascism After Hitler: East German Youth and Socialist Memory, 1949-1989*, (London: Routledge/Taylor Francis Group, 2015), 13.

and lent legitimacy to self-empowerment and the use of force.”⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ The Hitler Youth learned to cope with the betrayal of their Fuhrer and forged their own path in the world.⁶²

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 as well as everyone’s obligation to personal accountability. 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 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 them.

In the end, while none of the Hitler Youth can be completely forgiven for their transgressions it is important to acknowledge the limited control they had over their environment in which they grew up and lived. The story of the Hitler Youth is an important narrative of the

⁶⁰ Postert, “Isolated”, 420.

⁶¹ Plum, *Antifascism*, 13.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 13.

power the government holds over children's education; it demonstrates how easily people can be manipulated based on their environment. With the ability to disregard our self-serving bias, it allows us to understand that many Hitler Youth were not acting of their own accord but by their program leaders command, and above all else, Hitlers orders.

Works Consulted

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.