

Teenage rebels who fought Nazis are honoured at last

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Vilified 'Edelweiss Pirates' are hailed as resistance heroes. Hannah Cleaver reports

A group of rebellious teenagers who formed a resistance network against the Nazis are being honoured after almost 60 years of neglect by the German authorities, who considered them no better than common criminals.

The Edelweiss Pirates, as they were known, were working class teenagers from western Germany who fought the Hitler Youth and helped resistance groups, risking imprisonment and death.

The Gestapo declared the group criminals in the 1940s, a tag which was allowed to remain for 60 years.

Six of their number were executed by the Gestapo and some have been honoured by Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust memorial, for hiding Jews from Nazi persecution.

Tomorrow a small group of surviving Edelweiss Pirates will perform some of their songs on stage in Cologne, alongside local musicians at a festival which coincides with last week's official recognition of the group as resistance fighters.

"We were from the working classes, that is the main reason why we have only now been recognised," said Gertrud Koch, 81, who still goes by her Edelweiss codename of Mucki. "After the war there were no judges in Germany so the old Nazi judges were used and they upheld the criminalisation of what we did and who we were."

As a teenager Mrs Koch wanted to train as a Montessori teacher, but the kindergarten was closed by the Nazis.

She spent nine months in a Gestapo jail, was repeatedly beaten and was once thrown down stairs, breaking her arm.

The efforts of the White Roses, a similar, but much smaller group based at Munich University

who were executed for distributing resistance leaflets, have been celebrated since shortly after the war.

But it has taken until now for the Edelweiss Pirates, who are thought to have numbered more than 5,000, to be recognised.

They not only produced and distributed leaflets, and wrote anti-war graffiti, they also took on groups of Hitler Youth in street battles and stole food, supplies and even some explosives to supply small local adult resistance groups.

Groups from different areas would meet in the countryside, to swap information gained from illegally listening to the BBC world service, or to plan leaflet drops in each other's towns so the local police would not recognise them - but also to sing songs and indulge in relationships, an aspect of teenage life frowned upon by the strictly segregated Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls.

To British ears the name edelweiss inevitably recalls *The Sound of Music*, but the pirates were often children of communist families or from rough backgrounds, far from the lifestyle of the aristocratic Von Trapps in the film. Many had seen their parents arrested and even murdered for their communist views.

Mrs Koch remembers her family hiding a Jewish musician in their allotment garden from 1938 to 1939. "We hid Julio Gossler, the music director of the Cologne conservatoire. We took him food there for about a year and a half," she said.

She was also involved with distributing leaflets urging German soldiers to put down their weapons and come home to the families that needed them.

She and Jean Juelich, 76, another former Edelweiss Pirate, have spearheaded the fight to have the group recognised as resistance fighters.

Mr Juelich, who will be also be performing at tomorrow's festival along with rap and reggae bands which have created new versions of Edelweiss Pirate songs, said he was still angry that it took Germany so long to honour his group.

"This should have happened 40 years ago," he said. "The families of those who were murdered

have been denied any kind of justice until now. They were killed as criminals."

Juergen Roters, whose office equates to chief administrator of Cologne, awarded the Edelweiss Pirates official recognition as resistance fighters last week, a move much appreciated but one which almost came too late.

"There are only five of us left in Cologne," said Mucki. "Four of the boys and me."



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