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Edelweiss Pirates

The Edelweiss Pirates

I want a brutal, domineering, fearless cruel youth.
Youth must be all that. It must bear pain. There must
be nothing weak and gentle about it. The free,
splendid beast of prey must once again flash from its

eyes. That is how I will eradicate thousands of years of human domestication. That is how I will create the New Order.

Adolph Hitler

Hitler's power may lay us low,
And keep us locked in chains,
But we will smash the chains one day,
We'll be free again.
We've got the fists and we can fight,
We've got the knives and we'll get them
out.
We want freedom, don't we boys?
Song of the Edelweiss Pirates
(Peukert, p. 158)

There were many young people in Nazi Germany who resisted the cruelties of the Nazi Youth and remained true to their own codes of moral conduct. The Edelweiss Pirates was one of the largest youth groups who refused to participate in Nazi youth activities. The police were not allowed to arrest members of the Hitler Youth Patrol Service, who were known for their brutality and bullying. Hitler Youth were guilty of many crimes, they broke shop windows, stole, and beat people on the streets. In one case, a group of Hitler Youth broke the windows of the home of a teacher who had given them low marks. The Nazi Youth Patrol raided movie houses, cabarets, billiard halls and coffee shops looking for the Edelweiss Pirates, who stood up to them and even fought with them on the streets of the cities of Dusseldorf, Essen, Cologne and other industrial cities in western Germany.

The Edelweiss Pirates had different names in different cities, but they shared basic beliefs and attitudes. They were not deprived children or delinquents; most were not even deliberate resistance fighters. They were simply the sons and daughters of working class parents who refused to be bullied into absolute obedience. Most of the Pirates were between 16 to 18 years of age and were too young for military service.

The first Pirates appeared at the end of the 1930's. Dressed in checkered shirts, short dark trousers and white stockings, the Pirates wore metal Edelweiss pins on their collars. Because they lived in the same neighborhoods they had a territorial identity and shared beliefs. Refusing to participate in Nazi Youth activities, they shared a strong sense of social identity and solidarity with one another.

The groups of Edelweiss Pirates consisted of ten to fifteen boys, there were girls in some of the groups too. During the day they worked in factories and mills as unskilled workers and in the evenings and weekends they met together in cafes or in the parks. The high point of their activities together was the hikes they took into the countryside with rucksacks on their backs and their bread and butter rations. At night they slept in barns or tents. Sometimes they rode bicycles deep into the countryside ignoring the Nazi rules. Always on the watch for the dreaded Nazi Youth Patrols, they sometimes provoked street fights, but most of the time they avoided the Nazi Youth.

As the war progressed, social chaos intensified, and many Pirates became active in the underground resistance movement. When the industrial cities were being bombed between 1942 and 1945, the conflicts between the Edelweiss Pirates and the Nazi authorities intensified. Edelweiss Pirates in Cologne

offered shelter to German army deserters, escaped prisoners from concentration camps, and escapees from forced labor camps. Groups of Edelweiss Pirates made armed raids on military depots and deliberately sabotaged war production. The Nazis were determined to suppress them.

A Nazi official wrote, "There is a suspicion that it is these youths who have been inscribing the walls (of the pedestrian underground walkways in the Altenbergstrasse, a boulevard in the center of the city) with the slogans "Down with Hitler". "The OKW (Oberkommande des Wehrmacht) is lying", "Down with Nazi brutality". No matter how often the writings on the walls were scrubbed away, they were back again after a few days.

Nazi patrols were constantly looking for members of the Pirates and those who were caught were imprisoned, sent to jails, reform schools, psychiatric hospitals, labor and concentration camps and many lost their lives. In a single day of raids in December 1942, the Dusseldorf Gestapo and the Secret Police made more than 1000 arrests. During the round ups, the Nazis were brutal. Captured Pirates had their heads shaven, were threatened and beaten, and often cruelly punished. A member of the Pirates was publicly executed by hanging in the center of the city of Cologne. The story of the Edelweiss Pirates is a story of courage and resistance.

- Return to Faces of Courage: Children Who Resisted

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