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The Edelweiss Pirates

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The Edelweiss Pirates were groups of youths who opposed Nazi rule. The Edelweiss Pirates were primarily opposed to the way the Hitler Youth movement had taken over the lives of youths in Hitler's Germany. It is difficult to give an exact date as to when the Edelweiss Pirates first started but in 1936 membership of the Hitler Youth movement was made compulsory and historians tend to use this date as the start of the 'Pirates'.

The Edelweiss Pirates was not a specific movement but rather an association of a number of youth movements that had developed in western Germany in response to the Nazi regimentation of youths. The Edelweiss Pirates were diametrically the opposite of the Hitler Youth movement, which was run on quasi-military lines. They were free to express what they thought. While boys and girls were strictly segregated in the Hitler Youth movement, the Edelweiss Pirates encouraged the opposite.

Most cities in western Germany had some form of Edelweiss Pirates group, though some did not use the title. In Köln (Cologne), for example, they were known as the 'Navajos.' A few traits linked all the groups. There was a general objection to the way the Nazis wished to control the lives of the youths in Germany. Members of the Edelweiss Pirates would have had an education controlled by the Nazis while they were at school (compulsory education ended at the age of 14). Under 14's also had their evening time effectively controlled as well. If someone had been 13 at the time Hitler became Chancellor in January 1933, they would have experienced a year of a Nazi education syllabus with all that was associated with it before they could have left school. By 1937, he/she would have been 17 – the age of compulsory military service. From the time that person had left school to the time a male youth would have received their call-up papers, there would have been an all-out attempt by the Nazis to control the life of that person. While it is a common perception that everyone was under the control of the Nazis and that the secret police had informants everywhere, it is clear that large cities did have sections of the youth community that were disaffected. It was these young people who formed Edelweiss Pirate groups. Basically, they were anti-authority and non-conformist.

They also offered a way of life outside of the strangulating Nazi regime. Members of the Edelweiss Pirates defied restrictions on movement by going on hiking and camping trips. While on these trips they would have enough freedom to sing songs banned by the Nazis – mainly 'degenerate' blues or jazz songs that had filtered over from France. They could have open discussions on topics the likes of which would have been forbidden in the cities and which informants would almost certainly have overheard.

Between 1936 and September 1939, the Nazi authorities saw the Edelweiss Pirates as little more than a small-scale irritant. However, attitudes changed during [World War Two](#) when the authorities believed that the Edelweiss Pirates were responsible for collecting British anti-Nazi propaganda leaflets dropped by [Bomber Command](#) at the start of the war and posting them through letterboxes. This was seen as being more than just an irritation; it was classed as blatant subversion.

In July 1943, Nazi Party leaders in Dusseldorf contacted the [Gestapo](#) with their views on a local Edelweiss group. The letter stated that the "gang" was "throwing its weight around" and that the "riff-raff" represented a "danger to other young people". It claimed that this particular city group had an age range from 12 to 17 and that members of the army associated with them when they were on leave. The Dusseldorf city leaders also believed that the local Edelweiss group was responsible for anti-Hitler and anti-war graffiti in the city's pedestrian subways. However, it is clearly stated that these were only suspicions.

Even then, punishment for those caught was not as drastic as might have been thought given Nazi Germany's treatment of adult subversives. The authorities knew that members of the Edelweiss Pirates prided themselves on their appearance in the sense that it was very much non-militaristic. A standard punishment for anyone caught was to have their heads shaved so that their more bohemian appearance changed to an army/prison one. However, the activities of the Pirates did not endear themselves to [Heinrich Himmler](#) who required all Germans to be totally obedient. He ordered a crackdown on all youths who seemed to be failing in their total loyalty to Hitler and the Nazi state.

In a letter from Himmler to [Reinhard Heydrich](#) (January 1942) the head of the SS wrote that a half-measured approach to any youth groups that failed to show total loyalty was unacceptable and that members of any such groups had to be dealt with accordingly. Himmler told Heydrich that labour and work camps were inappropriate. They had to be sent to concentration camps for between "2 to 3 years". Himmler did not differentiate between male youths and "worthless girls".

"There the youth should first be given thrashings and then put through the severest drill and set to work. It must be made clear that they will never be allowed to go back to their studies. We must investigate how much encouragement they have had from their parents. If they have encouraged them, then they should also be put into a concentration camp and (have) their property confiscated." ('Hitler's Germany' by Jane Jenkins)

Himmler also advised Heydrich that he should intervene “brutally” to stop any further spread of disaffected youth groups. As the war progressed and the Nazi position became more precarious, Himmler ordered an even more brutal crackdown. In November 1944, thirteen youths were hanged in public in Cologne – six of them were or had been members of the Edelweiss Pirates.

As World War Two in Europe headed for its inevitable end, survival was the most important issue for all Germans – many of whom now lived in ruined cities. Fear of the advancing Red Army made refugees out of many Germans who fled to the advancing Allied armies in Western Europe. When the war ended it would have been expected that the Edelweiss Pirates would have ceased but this was not the case. They attempted to work with the Allied Occupying Authority but the AOA wanted a complete break with the past. They tolerated authorised and newly created youth movements – and this did not include the Edelweiss Pirates. The Soviet Union’s control over what was to become East Germany simply did not allow the Edelweiss Pirates to exist. Anyone caught who was proved to be a member received a 25 years prison sentence.

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