Growing Up with Antisemitism:

Nazi Youth Groups and the Hitler Youth Generation

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The Nazi regime required human capital to facilitate the Holocaust and remain in power. They also required obedience among their ranks. Children were a valuable resource, both in their ability to work for the regime, and in their young age, as this meant that they could grow up believing in Nazi ideals. Children were trained in Nazi youth groups which, through their activities and lessons, taught children Nazi ideology and trained them to be perfect German children in the eyes of the Party. With this training, the children were then able to be used for jobs during the Holocaust, which involved perpetrating antisemitic acts. After the Holocaust, the effects of Nazi Youth Groups on their childhoods did not disappear. This group became the Hitler Youth Generation and the majority remained antisemitic. While this generation’s childhoods were substantially affected by these youth groups, these children were also perpetrators of the Holocaust. The training this generation received, the acts they perpetrated, and their group’s post-war legacy will be examined through a lens of perpetuation. This essay will argue that the Hitler Youth Generation were taught antisemitism through Nazi Youth groups, which turned them into perpetrators of the Holocaust and which resulted in a skewed generational perspective on their involvement and history.

Nazi youth groups were divided along gender and age lines, creating four sections. The Jungvolk (Young Folk) was a group for boys aged 10 to 14.[[1]](#footnote-0) From age 14 to 18, boys then joined the Hitler Youth.[[2]](#footnote-1) For girls 10 to 14, there was the Jungmadelbund (League of Young Girls).[[3]](#footnote-2) From 14 to 18 girls were a part of the Bund Deutscher Madel (BDM/League of German Girls).[[4]](#footnote-3) Activities between the different age groups differed somewhat, but the purpose of these groups was the same. Collectively, these groups can be referred to as Nazi Youth Groups. This essay will focus primarily on the Hitler Youth and BDM, as examples of antisemitism are most clearly represented in these groups. The mission statement of this organisation, outlined by the Law on the Hitler Youth states that “The German Youth, besides being reared within the family and school, shall be educated physically, intellectually, and morally in the spirit of National Socialism to serve the people and community, through the Hitler Youth.”[[5]](#footnote-4) Hitler believed that Germany needed to indoctrinate children early to ensure the continued vitality of the Thousand Year Reich.[[6]](#footnote-5) Naxi Youth Groups were established to facilitate this indoctrination.

There were three important periods of time regarding these youth groups. Before 1933, membership was optional and there were a variety of youth groups, both affiliated and not affiliated with the Nazis, that children could participate in.[[7]](#footnote-6) Youth groups prior to 1933 had 5-6 million German children enrolled.[[8]](#footnote-7) The Nazi youth groups were not a new idea and were based on a long-standing German youth movement.[[9]](#footnote-8) The second period of these groups began in 1933 and ran until 1936. This period was one of expansion of Nazi youth groups from a small organisation, to one that contained more than half of all German children.[[10]](#footnote-9) Beginning with the Nazi assumption of power in 1933 other types of youth groups were gradually suppressed and outlawed.[[11]](#footnote-10) They would often be banned, or subsumed into the Nazi group.[[12]](#footnote-11) With the exception of some explicitly Catholic or Protestant leagues and the Scouts, the majority of non-Nazi youth groups were absorbed into the Nazi-run groups.[[13]](#footnote-12) The third period started in 1936, with the beginning of a recruitment drive. This year was named the Year of the Deutsches Jungvolk and saw an increased drive to recruit members.[[14]](#footnote-13) Recruitment lists were collected, and letters were sent to encourage parents to register their children.[[15]](#footnote-14) By April 1936, 90% of the children born in 1926 were enrolled in a Nazi youth group.[[16]](#footnote-15) While enrollment was not yet mandatory, there were extreme social pressures to conform and join the groups. Rules were created where all children who were not part of the organisation had to attend school on Saturdays. As pressure to conform increased, the number of children in these Saturday classes declined.[[17]](#footnote-16) Children would observe their friends joining these organisations, and would also wish to join. These organisations were not made mandatory until March 25th, 1939, with the implementation of the Hitler Youth Law.[[18]](#footnote-17)

The Hitler Youth Law made it mandatory for all eligible children to join one of these groups. Ineligible children included those with Jewish, or non-German ancestors.[[19]](#footnote-18) Any children that were found to be Jewish or Mischling were ejected.[[20]](#footnote-19) The only children permitted to join were those of German national origin, and German racialized stock.[[21]](#footnote-20) These organisations were created with political motivations to continue the Nazi state by bringing children into the Nazi movement and ideology. Due to their direct connection to Nazism, through the ideology which they taught and their organizational structure, the organizations were outlawed on October 10th, 1945.[[22]](#footnote-21) These organizations were attended by the majority of German children and had a significant impact on this generation of children.

**How Antisemitism Was Taught**

The goal of these groups was to teach children Nazi ideology, gain their loyalty and obedience, and create ‘perfect’ German children. There were different educational goals for girls and boys within these groups, but the types of education that they received were similar. Boys were being prepared for war, and life in a militarised society, while girls were given training in domestic science to prepare them for being homemakers and mothers.[[23]](#footnote-22) For both boys and girls, however, Baldur von Schricach, the former head of the Hitler Youth said that “It was my task to educate the youth in the aims, ideology and directives of the NSDAP, and beyond this to direct and to shape them.”[[24]](#footnote-23) In order to shape children, the Nazi Party taught them ideological lessons and controlled their free time. Children had to attend these youth groups every weekend, as well as every afternoon after school.[[25]](#footnote-24) These groups were organized with the goal of making it impossible for children to engage in activities not organized by the Nazis.[[26]](#footnote-25) This prevented them from becoming exposed to non-Nazi ideas or activities, increasing the effectiveness of Nazi ideological teachings.

There was also a sense of differentness and pride in being German introduced through the mandated uniform of these groups. All children who participated received a uniform, and typically wore the uniform all year, including while at non-group-related activities.[[27]](#footnote-26) This gave the children a sense of pride, belonging, and would have served to differentiate German children from non-German children. The uniform, along with the activities that children participated in gave them a sense of unity, adventure, and of being special.[[28]](#footnote-27) Children who participated in these groups also received more direct Nazi education. This education took three main forms; physical education, education in nature, and classroom lessons.

The type of education that was deemed to be the most important was physical education. It was given primary importance as healthy children were seen as useful to society.[[29]](#footnote-28) The girls' group, the BDM, was particularly interested in the toughening of the girls' physical bodies, believing that this would foster good mental health, a sense of duty, and a sense of independence.[[30]](#footnote-29) It was also believed that physical education was necessary to train children to be brave, loyal warriors, and good Germans.[[31]](#footnote-30) This education took many forms, including playing games, participating in sports, and general exercise.[[32]](#footnote-31) These games and sports were seen as some of the most popular activities within the youth organisations. Children after the war reported that it was their second favourite part of the groups.[[33]](#footnote-32) These types of activities were particularly popular as these organized activities allowed children to play, and do sports, which had previously been forbidden.[[34]](#footnote-33) While these activities appeared to just be simple fun, they were important in subtly creating the types of German children that the Nazi Party wanted, as well as creating good memories attached to the Party.

Education through nature was another important method through which the Nazis transmitted their ideologies. This back-to-nature approach of a youth group was not unique to the Nazi groups. In the early 1900s, German youth movement groups started to go back to nature to create what they deemed to be a more authentic German culture, often taking the form of collective camping trips.[[35]](#footnote-34) The Nazis used this tradition of nature to serve their ideology. In particular, the back-to-nature approach was used to foster a sense of national identity and to promote the Nazi concept of Lebensraum. The camps that children would be taken to were built to be reflective of a German medieval village.[[36]](#footnote-35) This would create a sense of national identity, and connection to history. Additionally, camps were structured to limit parental control and outside influences, which amplified the impact of the camping experience.[[37]](#footnote-36) The hikes were created to show children the beauty of the German landscape and to foster a sense of connection to and nationalism with the land.[[38]](#footnote-37) All of these methods subtly connected land, nature, and camp to Nazi ideology for the children who participated.

While nature and physical education were subtle ways of teaching children, classroom education was an explicit method that the Nazi Party used. Nazi education at these youth groups was designed to be a continuation of the ideologies taught in school classrooms.[[39]](#footnote-38) As such, they integrated the teachings from the classroom, children's books, poems, songs, and antisemitic ideology from the media. Within these lessons, the leaders of the youth groups would teach history, racial science, explicit antisemitism, and Party policies.[[40]](#footnote-39) The children were taught a very limited view of history. Their history lessons were typically only concerned with World War One, the Weimar Republic, the Treaty of Versailles, and then the rise of Hitler to bring Germany back to greatness.[[41]](#footnote-40) The Nazi Primer is a document created by the Nazi Party to outline what children in the Nazi Youth Groups should be taught.[[42]](#footnote-41) This included lessons on evolution and the creation of more healthy Germans.[[43]](#footnote-42) This was used to teach children their responsibility to procreate and to avoid racial mixing.[[44]](#footnote-43) Explicit antisemitism would include lessons on how to spot a Jew, or the depiction of Jewish people as criminalized, evil, or without a soul.[[45]](#footnote-44) Children were also taught to memorize Nazi Party history, organization and hierarchy.[[46]](#footnote-45) The method of classroom teaching varied. It included direct lessons, often with pictures or propagandistic slides.[[47]](#footnote-46) Children were given books and articles, including Hilf Mit, a Nazi periodical, and novels with antisemitic narratives.[[48]](#footnote-47) The most memorable parts of these lessons, as reported in memoirs, were the poems and stories that the children were taught.[[49]](#footnote-48) After the war, these classroom lessons were reported to have been children's least favourite part of these groups.[[50]](#footnote-49) However, they were important in teaching children Nazi ideology and were particularly important for the children who rose within the Nazi Party structure.[[51]](#footnote-50) As such, classroom lessons were an important way in which the Nazi Party explicitly transmitted their ideology.

All of the activities within these groups were carefully coordinated to serve Nazi goals, from the activities themselves, to how they made children like the Party and took away their free time. These lessons and activities could then be mobilized by the Party to have the children do their bidding. These lessons were valuable in creating a generation of children who were obedient to the Nazi Party, who perpetrated antisemitic acts, and for many, who genuinely believed in the Nazi Party's ideas.

**Participation in the Holocaust and Antisemitism**

These forms of education were operated to train children to participate in the Nazi plans and war effort. Through these programs, children were trained to participate in the regime as adults, they participated in the war effort and Holocaust as children, and they perpetrated individual acts of antisemitism against their Jewish peers.

Children who participated in Nazi youth groups were trained to produce children, become involved in German industry, or become involved in the military as adults. All of these positions were designed to support the Nazi plan for society, so as such these children were being trained to participate in the Holocaust. The training that German children underwent was successful. One demonstration of its effectiveness is seen in 1945 when they were told to fight to the death as Germany was losing the war.[[52]](#footnote-51) The willingness of individuals to do this demonstrates that years of training and racial indoctrination turned them into an army of “ruthless, brainwashed killers, with little fear of dying for their beloved Germany”.[[53]](#footnote-52) Additionally, examples of former Nazi Youth Group children, such as the notorious camp guard Irma Grese, demonstrate how ideological indoctrination and training on brutality were effective in influencing the behaviour of the participants as adults.[[54]](#footnote-53) Through these groups the Nazi Party was able to successfully communicate their ideology and shape the behaviour of participants as adults, demonstrating the success of this organisational plan.

Children became involved in the war efforts in a variety of different ways while they were in these youth groups. Girls would do domestic tasks, such as laundry, for the SS and SA men.[[55]](#footnote-54) Children were moved into certain positions, such as those in industry, to keep the German economy operational while men were at front lines.[[56]](#footnote-55) They would help more directly in war efforts through work on constructing anti-aircraft barriers, anti-aircraft guns, and participation in paramilitary units.[[57]](#footnote-56) Additionally, they would collect materials for bombing victims.[[58]](#footnote-57) They would support soldiers at the front by sending letters and care packages.[[59]](#footnote-58) Children were used on the home front to uphold Nazi ideology. They would be in charge of enforcing policies preventing people from shopping in Jewish stores.[[60]](#footnote-59) Additionally, they recall that as they were in charge of reporting anti-Nazi behaviour, their family members would stop jokingly bringing up anti-Nazi ideas in front of children involved in these groups.[[61]](#footnote-60) Children were a vital workforce for the Nazi Party and Germany during wartime, as they could perform vital labour and public surveillance for the regime.

The final way in which these children can be seen as perpetrators of the Holocaust is through the ways in which they participated in individual acts of antisemitism, often against their Jewish peers. While official guidelines of these organizations prevented children from using arbitrary force, as it was thought to create a bad image for the groups, children were not stopped from participating in antisemitic activities.[[62]](#footnote-61) Antisemitism by children was so widespread that Jewish children reported that it was common practice to cross the street when they saw a group of Hitler Youth in uniforms, to avoid being harassed.[[63]](#footnote-62) Additionally, even when German children seemed friendly, there was a fear that they may turn on their Jewish peers. Leo Diamanstein reports that he had befriended a German child who was part of the Hitler Youth, who had initially seemed friendly.[[64]](#footnote-63) However, one day the German child got mad, and cursed the Jewish children saying that they would all be killed eventually.[[65]](#footnote-64) Another example of this comes from Melita Maschmann who remembers picking on a Jewish girl by giving her family a fake train ticket to Jerusalem with no return.[[66]](#footnote-65) These children would often mobilize Nazi ideology against their Jewish peers, including using epithets such as “lying Jews.”[[67]](#footnote-66) Childhood jealousy would be turned antisemitic. For instance, Melita Maschmann reports feeling jealous of Jewish children in her class, viewing them all as rich.[[68]](#footnote-67) These examples are a demonstration of the internalisation of antisemitic Nazi ideology by children, and how this ideology was used against their Jewish peers and friends.

In understanding children as perpetrators of the Holocaust, it is important to recognize the ways in which some children resisted participation. This is important as it contrasts the children who willingly, or even enthusiastically, participated in antisemitic activities. It is typically estimated that most children willingly participated in these Nazi Youth Groups, with a small portion of children enthusiastically participating.[[69]](#footnote-68) While there was widespread acceptance of Nazi youth groups, there were still significant numbers of children who participated in resistance against these groups.[[70]](#footnote-69) This resistance took a variety of forms; some refused to join the groups, some sabotaged, and some would not attend meetings at all or only infrequently.[[71]](#footnote-70) Within memoir accounts, such as those by Fest, it is shown that those who refused to participate, or who refused to allow their children to participate, often experienced no consequences for this choice.[[72]](#footnote-71) This demonstrates the relative ease at which individuals could refuse to participate, and further implicates those who did participate, particularly those who demonstrated enthusiasm for participation.

It is through this participation in the Holocaust and antisemitic acts that these children can be seen as perpetrators. These children were a vital resource for the Nazi Party, and willingly participated in Nazi planning, both as adults and as children. This demonstrates the success of teaching children in these groups. Their willingness to participate, even when non-participation was not punished, means that those who became involved in antisemitic acts and the Nazi plans are responsible for their actions, and should be viewed as perpetrators.

**Remembrance of their Involvement**

While these children should be viewed as perpetrators, the generation of children which typically participated do not see themselves as such. The generation of participants is typically called the Hitler Youth Generation. It includes German children who were children during the Holocaust and concluded the war as either older children or young adults.[[73]](#footnote-72) This group has dominated post-war recollections of the Holocaust as they were able to tell first-hand accounts without the blame ascribed to many of the other perpetrators.[[74]](#footnote-73) This is because they were deemed to be just children who had been indoctrinated and therefore blameless. Additionally, they were not held accountable through legal proceedings.[[75]](#footnote-74) This was due to complexities around to what level children can be held responsible for their actions and be considered guilty.[[76]](#footnote-75) This meant that they were able to speak about their experiences without the fear of incriminating themselves. However, not all children understood themselves to be blameless, and some, such as the author Melita Maschmann, have chosen to take responsibility for their involvement during the Holocaust. The memoirs written by the Hitler Youth Generation walk a line between eyewitness, bystander and perpetrator.[[77]](#footnote-76) Memoirs from this time are written by eyewitnesses to the Holocaust, but debates exist as to whether they are simply eyewitnesses, culpable bystanders, or active perpetrators. Different adults take different perspectives on their childhoods. Some take no responsibility for the Holocaust, some try to downplay their involvement, while others take responsibility for their action and their involvement within these groups.

A significant portion of the Hitler Youth Generation take no responsibility for their actions in the Holocaust. In the postwar period, there were tales that antisemitism could not be found among training materials for the Nazi youth groups.[[78]](#footnote-77) They argued that these were just children's groups run by the Party, but were not involved in the ideology of the Party or its action. However, this is demonstrably false. The Party actively taught antisemitism, and Nazi ideology, and had titles for training that included “The Fuhrer is Putting a Stop to Jewish World Domination,” a blatantly antisemitic title.[[79]](#footnote-78) Additionally, some did not see a problem with Nazi ideology after the war and went on to join illegal organizations based on Nazi ideology.[[80]](#footnote-79) While the group that did not view these groups as antisemitic, or did not view this antisemitism problematic, there is a far larger group of people who attempted to downplay their involvement or responsibility in these organizations after they were disbanded.

Adults also attempted to downplay their responsibility. Memoirs are often used to position the authors, members of the Hitler Youth Generation, and their families, as victims of the Nazi regime, rather than perpetrators of the Holocaust.[[81]](#footnote-80) Memoirs are often used to downplay the role of other Nazi Party family members, who may have been very involved in the Holocaust.[[82]](#footnote-81) This message is further reinforced by the statement made by Baldur von Schirach, the “Youth Leader of the German Reich.”[[83]](#footnote-82) He said that “It is my guilt… and so I bear this guilt on behalf of this youth. The young generation is innocent.”[[84]](#footnote-83) This indicates that children who were part of these groups need not take responsibility for their involvement, and all the blame could be placed on von Schirach. This further allows the children who participated to escape responsibility for their connection to or involvement in the Holocaust. After the end of the war, most participants fell into this category of trying to downplay their connection to the Holocaust. As part of this, most claimed that they were unable to resist involvement within these groups, arguing that they did not enjoy their participation, or that they were forced into the Nazi Party.[[85]](#footnote-84) While indoctrination into Nazi ideology did play an important role in these groups, downplaying the involvement or the role of these children as perpetrators can be harmful as it is often used to place these children in the role of victim, disregarding the harm that the children perpetrated.

The final group is adults who have since taken responsibility for their involvement. There are examples of this shown in the memoir by Maschmann and in the film *Final Account.* These adults argue that they are perpetrators of the Holocaust, either because they took part in the Holocaust actively, or because they were bystanders and let it happen.[[86]](#footnote-85) This is a difficult position to take, as it often results in the children having complicated feelings towards the adults who allowed them to participate in these organisations. They may have complicated feelings towards parents, who did not speak up against their indoctrination during the war, or who willingly let them attend these groups, particularly before they became mandatory.[[87]](#footnote-86) They may also have felt that renouncing their behaviour in these groups was betraying the Nazi Party members who they had looked up to as children, but whose ideology they now find reprehensible.[[88]](#footnote-87) These adults have had a long journey to unlearn the antisemitic ideology which they had been taught for most of their childhood.

Regardless of the perspectives of individual members of the Hitler Youth Generation, the impacts on their generation as a whole have been profound. One study by Voigtlaender and Voth found that antisemitic attitudes are particularly pronounced for the Hitler Youth Generation.[[89]](#footnote-88) This demonstrates that the teachings of the Nazi Party within these groups were effective. Particularly as the differential effects are still visible today, with members of this generation being more antisemitic than the preceding or following generations.[[90]](#footnote-89) Antisemitism for this group had become second nature, being a key part of their experiences as children.[[91]](#footnote-90) In the post-war period, there were efforts to re-educate members of this generation, particularly the leaders within these groups.[[92]](#footnote-91) This re-education ran the risk of reaffirming feelings of hatred towards Jews, as the basis of their identity had been built on antisemitism, and they were now being singled out for these beliefs.[[93]](#footnote-92) Children who had been taught that they were racially superior, would have experienced challenges relearning a basic tenant of their identity as adults. This generation struggled to understand national socialism as both evil, and something that people they loved, and that they themselves, were a part of.[[94]](#footnote-93) The process of unlearning antisemitism would have taken potentially decades for some, and it would have required a significant amount of effort, that not everyone was willing to commit to.

**Conclusion**

Nazi Youth Groups had a substantial impact on the childhoods of individuals who participated in them. These children, who now are considered to make up the Hitler Youth Generation also made a substantial impact on the Holocaust. These children participated in the war effort as children and adults, and perpetrated individual acts of antisemitism. Additionally, the impact of these groups continued after the war, as this generation tried to avoid blame, mitigate blame, or more rarely, attempted to take responsibility for their actions as children. The category of perpetrators is often tightened to exclude groups such as children, as they are seen to be innocent and blameless. But so were their victims. It is important to research, and recognize the ways in which children perpetrated the Holocaust, and supported the Nazi regime. While these children cannot be held legally responsible for their actions, as there are questions around their capacity to understand their actions as wrong, historians can and should assign them a degree of moral responsibility. Viewing children who participated in the Nazi Youth Groups as perpetrators allows for a recognition of the responsibility that they had for the Holocaust and the ways in which their actions harmed Jewish individuals and the Jewish community.

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