

# The hitler youth

[People](#), [Adolf Hitler](#)



The horrors of the Second World War – especially the atrocities committed by the Nazis and their Eastern European (and French) collaborators – will most likely never be forgotten; taken as a collective, they constitute the most gruesome catalogue of crimes in modern human history. With that in mind, the following paper will look at how it came to be that so many of Germany's best and brightest young people could become swept up in the machinations of a hate-filled and awesomely destructive regime.

In particular, the ensuing pages will look at the Hitler Youth and argue that it was a state-driven organization – well-integrated with more hardened governmental elements – that grew to gargantuan proportions by the dawn of the War, effectively sucking in an entire generation of German youth.

Every bit as importantly, it will be put forward that the members of the Hitler Youth were frequently very highly committed to the objectives of the Nazi government because of the deliberate integration of the Hitler Youth with the SS, the SA, and – most disturbing of all – the frightfully brutal SS-Totenkopfverbände (the “Death Head's” formations that acted as Nazi concentration camp guards).

Likewise, devotion to the cause was invigorated by the unhappiness among many German youth with the shortcomings and weaknesses of post-War Germany; in a similar vein, as it pertains to things such as the Nazi regime's rabid anti-Semitism, many young people in Germany at the time were well-prepared to accept such teachings inasmuch as German society as a whole was strongly (if somewhat surreptitiously) anti-Semitic.

Finally, if pre-existing disenchantment and naivete were not enough to make young Germans useful pawns for the Nazis, the Hitler Youth impressively raised the commitment level of its membership through an intensive indoctrination program that was surely among the most sophisticated seen up to that time. In the end, while clearly not every German youth accepted the mad ravings of the Nazis, far too many did – and even those who resisted found themselves with little recourse but to be a part of its machinery.

As much as some might wish to deny it, there is strong evidence that the Hitler Youth (the Hitlerjugend or HJ) was well-integrated within the Nazi apparatus. For one thing, it was sometimes said within Nazi Party circles during the midst of the Second World War that the HJ actually walked in lock-step with Himmler's SS (Schutzstaffel).

As if this involvement was not troubling enough, it appears as though the Hitler Youth was intimately associated with both the SA (Sturmabteilung) and the SS – though the SS influence and relationship did grow stronger over the course of the 1930s. In any case, the SA did begin training HJ members (under Hitlerjugend auspices) at the age of 17, thereby preparing them for military roles in the war just ahead (Rempel, 19-20). Suffice it to say, any retroactive claims that the HJ operated at arm's length from the SS (and the earlier SA) are simply inaccurate.

Additionally, any notion that the Hitler Youth were not well-apprised of the SS's destructive activities must also be discounted; while they may not have known all of the Sturmabteilung's goings-on, they surely knew enough to appreciate the dark nature of Hitler's "Protective Squadron". To the extent German youth fell under Hitler's spell in the 1930s, the SS's attitude towards

the HJ – especially after 1934 – must be considered a vital piece of the puzzle.

Simply put, the Sturmabteilung began to pay especial attention to the HJ in the middle-1930s and beyond, with SS senior officials being warmly encouraged to take an interest – or at least feign an interest – in Hitlerjugend activities; at about the same time, SS head, Heinrich Himmler, began to make it a point of appearing before the HJ: in late 1936, he actually told assembled members of the SS-Gruppenfuhrer that he had given more speeches to the HJ that year than he had to the SS.

Not to be overlooked, Himmler reduced the probationary period in the SS for those who had been in the HJ before 1933 and he also provided other perks for HJ members; most notably, he reduced the height requirement for members of the HJ who wished to fulfill their military requirements in the SSVT (SS Verfügungstruppe) or “ Special Purpose” troops.

But the most horrifying thing that Himmler did, and it may have been the one thing that de-sensitized young and impressionable Germans to the horrors of the Nazi regime, was his decision to give Hitler Youth members duties inside the nation’s political concentration camps before the beginning of the war; in short, the most susceptible young people in the Reich (young adolescent boys with aspirations of grandeur within the paramilitary and military structure of 1930s Germany) were recruited into the especially brutal SS-Totenkopfverbände (“ Death Head’s Formations”) that “ looked after” Germany’s alleged political enemies in these dehumanizing places. In the end, the young men who entered the SSVT were being groomed for a prominent role in the execution of some of the darkest acts of the Third

Reich and their linkage to the barbarity of the aforementioned camps cannot be dismissed (Rempel, 24-28).

The last two paragraphs have highlighted how the Hitler Youth were inextricably tied in with the SSVT, the SS, and (albeit to a lesser extent after roughly 1935) the SA. Suffice it to say, if one is looking for a reason why so many young Germans went happily – or at least resolutely – marching off to their deaths at the behest of a depraved leadership, the progressive desensitization involved with HJ members spending frequent stretches of time with the above-mentioned organizations is surely part of the reason.

Beyond that, Hitler moved aggressively – once it was clear his power was sufficiently consolidated – to bring as many young Germans as legislatively possible under the umbrella of the HJ at precisely the point in time when it was finding itself increasingly incorporated into the SS, the SA, and the SSVT. For instance, membership in the Hitler Youth was, “ at least theoretically,” compulsory after December, 1936; thanks to this proclamation, the total membership of the HJ jumped from its 1935 high of 828, 361 to 1, 723, 886 by 1939 (Rempel, 283 and 268).

In the end, the Hitler Youth became pervasive because Hitler made it so; moreover, if those within the HJ became progressively more radicalized, it was because Himmler exposed them to many of the most unsavory aspects of the Third Reich. In the end, the combination of universal, mandatory membership and unrelenting indoctrination turned many German youngsters into torch-bearers and spear-carriers for a murderous regime.

Naturally enough, the question of just how popular Hitler really was with Germany's youth needs to be handled with some care; after all, it may be inferred that Hitler's decision in 1936 to make mandatory membership in the HJ was predicated upon an understanding that simply waiting for youth to gleefully sign up was not going to yield the universal socializing experience he sought for the future of the Third Reich. That being said, many young people in pre-war Germany were all-too-receptive to Hitler's message of revenge, redemption, and national glory.

As Detlev Peutkert writes, " those whose adolescence fell in the years 1933-36 had already had important, formative experiences before the Nazi seizure of power.... They had (experienced) the economic crisis of the early 1930s and were therefore quite receptive to the benefits offered by the rearmament programme (particularly after 1935-36), as well as to the ideas of the Fuhrerstaat (leadership state), with its promise of an end to ' party squabbles,' and of the restoration of national greatness" (25).

The cohort of youngsters who came immediately after them in the years 1936-39 were even more malleable: they had gone through schools " that bore the stamp" of the Nazis' National Socialism and found in the Hitler Youth a sanctuary against the conventional authority institutions of home and school; additionally, they found plenty of comradeship and recreational activities. Lastly, many of the members drawn in during this period saw an opportunity to make something of themselves - although the skeptical increasingly faced coercion as the HJ became more bureaucratized (Peutkert, 25).

The essential point is that many German young people in the 1930s saw the Hitler Youth as an escape from the drudgery of ordinary life; they also had either grown up in difficult circumstances that made inclusion in the Nazi apparatus seem appealing – or they had been students in schools that were, for all intents and purposes, madrassahs for the National Socialist Party and its manifold messages.

The final and, in some ways, the most tragic youth cohort in Germany during the 12 years Hitler was in power was the millions of German youth who entered adolescence with the war fully under way; in short, those who spent their teenage years watching Germany gain great swaths of territory in the galvanic victories of 1939 and 1940, only to slowly cede ground as the Allies inexorably pushed back after the end of 1941.

During this dark period, the HJ was wholly bureaucratized and coercive; many of the youth leaders were drafted straight into the army; those comparatively few who somehow escaped the horrors of war at the front nonetheless saw HJ buildings and sports fields destroyed. It was in this period that National Socialist institutions, far from enthralling these young people, became symbols of revulsion and disgust (Peutkert, 25-26).

Be all that as it may, the final turn against the Nazis by those young Germans fortunate enough to survive the war – but not so fortunate as to escape the lingering taint and psychic scars of its horrors – came far too late for far too many; suffice it to say, Hitler's message of redemption, the "fun" that was initially to be had by becoming a member of the Hitler Youth, and the eventual coercive tactics undertaken to keep young people "in the fold" (or to bring new young people in) all conspired to trap youngsters in an

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apparatus that ultimately promised only death, depravity and misery whatever its initial appeal.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, with literally scores of millions dead and Germany in a shambles (and about to be partitioned by Western and Soviet forces), it was left to bewildered observers to figure out how Hitler could have so impressed himself upon the consciousness of the German people that great numbers of them would join his dark legions without regard for the possible consequences.

Writing in 1946, Howard Becker suggests that post-World War I German youth detested the weak and ineffectual Weimar Republic and all it stood for; this resentment against what the past had wrought was conjoined to a fascination with Hitler and with the charismatic leadership he offered. Just as importantly (especially in light of the fact that the Holocaust may well be the darkest act of an indescribably brutal Second World War) Becker argues that too many of the youth alive in Germany as Hitler seized power were willing to believe even the most perverse lies about the Jews.

As a generation that had grown up with the shame of the First World War and its “humiliating” peace terms all around them, it was apparently easy for many adolescent and pre-adolescent Germans to become enthralled with Hitler’s message of German redemption – and equally outraged at the “Jewish cabal” that kept Germany in abject subjugation (Becker, 147-153). To wit, the Jews that Hitler railed against “had never been Linden Tree peasants, roving journeymen, wandering scholars, knights-errant, or effervescent Burschenschaft patriots in numbers at all significant.



They were identified with mechanistic science, economic rationalism, detached internationalism, and metropolitan culture – all of them anathema to the youth movement” (Becker, 154). While Becker was writing at a point in history that might have been too proximate to the grim events of World War II (and the Holocaust) for him to exercise proper balance and perspective, his thesis about the role of anti-Semitism in galvanizing callow Germans to give themselves over to the Hitler Youth and to the teachings of the Nazis is one that warrants being taken seriously.

For instance, historians writing decades later have noted that hatred directed against the seemingly bourgeois and cosmopolitan Jews was a staple of German life in the 1920s and 1930s (Brustein, 38) – which means that the young people of the period would undoubtedly have received various lessons in anti-Semitism from their parents and community elders, to say nothing of grim warnings about the threat “ the Jew” constituted to the vitality of Aryan Germany.

Moreover, if what has been described in the preceding sentence is still not enough proof of the role latent anti-Semitism played in turning the most innocent members of German society into the all-too-frequent willing accomplices of a depraved regime, then readers should bear in mind that anti-Semitism was, quite literally, “ drilled” into the heads of even the most skeptical HJ members from almost the moment they joined (Koch, 119).

The key point here is that the Hitler Youth was a vast institution that reinforced and validated deep-seated prejudices among young German men and women. At the same time, youthful idealism, naivete, Hitler’s engrossing (if, in retrospect, deranged) oratory, angst about how Germany had been

mistreated in the aftermath of World War I, and a widely-shared sense that the Jews were opposed to Germany re-asserting itself as a great nation, all came together to make the Hitler Youth both an attractive option for the disillusioned – and a powerful tool of government indoctrination.

In closing, the Hitler Youth or HJ was a huge apparatus that, for all intents and purposes, drew in the totality of Germany's adolescent population. The juveniles who made up the membership of this vast organization may not all have been Nazis – but many of them did become partial to the cause and all of them were exposed to wide-spread indoctrination (and to de-sensitization exercises) that made it easier for them to be implements of the Nazi regime.

What is also clear is that the Hitler Youth was an attractive option for many Germans adolescents even before membership became compulsory; a wide-spread sense of grievance, alienation, latent anti-Semitism, fascination with Hitler, youthful idealism gone bad and a simple desire to be part of something novel – all of these items contributed to the formulation of what history now knows as the “ Hitler Youth”.

In the final analysis, if there is any lesson that can be taken from this exploration of Germany's Hitler Youth under Hitler and his co-criminals, it is that the national community (parents and, where possible, educators) has a powerful obligation to craft politically-sophisticated and responsible young people who cannot be easily swayed by ideas and notions that sound enchanting at first hearing but which mask much darker things. Ultimately, Germany must be held accountable for creating a cultural climate that made its young people receptive to the ravings of an Adolf Hitler.