

Militarized more than Nazified?

Was the Hitler Youth Successful in Providing Supporters for the National Socialists?

an Extended Essay in History by

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to discuss the main purposes of the Hitler Youth organization in Nazi Germany and examine the extent to which these were attained. Hitler Youth was an association coordinated by Adolf Hitler which eventually became compulsory for all boys aging from ten to eighteen.

The study looks at the entire period of the Nazi regime, 1933-1945, but focuses on the time after 1939 when the Hitler Youth became compulsory. Nazi ideology concerning the youth is discussed and also how it affected the aims and methods of Hitler Youth. The study looks at the different ways in which the organization influenced its members' lives, particularly with the help of a memoir by a former member. An explanation for the initial popularity of Hitler Youth is explored, and also what effect Nazi involvement in education had in the matter. However, the main emphasis of the essay is on the extent to which Hitler Youth's aims – Nazi indoctrination and military formation – were attained. After establishing these aims of Hitler Youth, it is possible to evaluate to what extent they were achieved and also suggest reasons for their success or failure.

The study tries to show that even though the fundamental aim of Hitler Youth was to indoctrinate youth, this did not succeed to any significant extent, but on the contrary, military formation did. The essay looks at the resistance towards indoctrination and tries to explain why it was hated, while military education was widely enjoyed by youth.

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1. Introduction

A common idea which has prevailed of the Hitler Youth is that portrayed in Leni Riefenstahl's infamous film, *The Triumph of the Will*. In this film of 1934, "energetic and enthusiastic youth appear constantly; flag waving, drum-beating, smiling, and swooning in the sunny presence of their Führer."¹ Was there truth behind this idealistic image? Were the German youths really enthusiastic National Socialists in spirit, or was this a façade?

In 1933, the Nazis seized power in Germany and soon established the largest youth organization in the world. For over a decade Hitler Youth constituted a large part of its members' lives and influenced their thoughts and actions. In 1945, when the National Socialists fell from power and Hitler Youth ceased to exist, many millions had already been involved in the association during their youth. The aim of this investigation is to look at the objectives of Hitler Youth and examine the extent to which these were attained.

To do this we will first need to establish what the different aims were. Two main aims can be distinguished in the Hitler Youth: Nazi indoctrination and military formation of youth. In order to gain a realistic image of Hitler Youth we will look at an autobiography by Jurgen Herbst, who was himself a member of the organization in his childhood. This memoir is extremely valuable and offers great insight into the ways in which the organization affected the lives of the youth. His observations are often supported by those found in secondary sources which are also examined in this study. In the light of these sources it can be concluded that the primary aim of Hitler Youth was the indoctrination of youth, while military education was always inferior to this. Interestingly, however, military formation achieved the greater success in Hitler Youth, while the essential aim of Nazi indoctrination turned out to be more of a failure.

2. The Development and Principles of Hitler Youth

The concept of an organization like Hitler Youth was not actually a new one, because many of the like had been present in Germany for decades. Indeed, it was on 4 July 1926 when Kurt Gruber's

¹ Eric A. Johnson, *Nazi Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) p.263.

Greater German Youth Association was renamed Hitler-Jugend [Hitler Youth].² The organization remained a fairly small one until 1933, when the new Nazi government started taking measures to make the youth join. However, Hitler Youth was not very successful in obtaining new members at the time, and hence these represented only a “tiny fraction” of the entire German youth.³ The organization under Baldur von Schirach [its first leader] “had attracted only 55,000 members by the time of Hitler’s seizure of power.”⁴ Changes were ahead though, because Hitler soon took control over recruiting new members. As a result, “the Hitler Youth was quickly transformed into the world’s largest youth organization.”⁵ By the end of 1933, Hitler Youth was the only youth organization standing, apart from Catholic ones, which were protected by the Concordat⁶. The number of youths incorporated into the association kept on growing at a tremendous rate through the 1930s, largely because of new laws that first made Hitler Youth the sole state organization and then, in 1939, compulsory. Around eight million youths were then part of the association.

The structure of the Nazi youth organization was moulded into its final form soon after Hitler assumed power. The organization came to consist of two separate associations, whose principal difference was the age group of the boys. Jungvolk, or German Young People, was meant for boys aging from ten to fourteen, while boys older than that were part of the Hitler Youth proper. A parallel set of organizations existed for girls, Jungmädel (Young Girls League) and the League of German Girls, but these had different aims and concerned themselves more with producing good housewives. When boys had stayed in the Jungvolk for the four years that they were required to, they continued straight to Hitler Youth proper with no other options. However, after the start of the Second World War there was a change in the structure, because it seems that during the war the boys were free to choose where to go after they had finished with Jungvolk. They could well choose to join Hitler Youth proper, but this had ceased to be compulsory, and instead the boys could opt to join the army.

2.1 Nazi Ideology

Hitler seemed to have clear ideas about what kind of development the youth should be subjected to. Publicly these could be seen in works such as *Mein Kampf*, the notorious propaganda book. Even

² H.W. Koch, *The Hitler Youth* (London: Macdonald and Company (Publishers) Ltd., 1975) p.64.

³ Eric A. Johnson, *Nazi Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) p.263.

⁴ *ibid.* p.263.

⁵ *ibid.* p.264.

⁶ The Concordat was a formal agreement concerning the Catholic religion which Hitler had signed with the Vatican in July 1933.

though the true ideas of the Nazi leadership might have differed a bit, the principles expressed in *Mein Kampf* must have been based on these. “Their whole education and training must be directed towards giving them a conviction that they are superior to others. Through bodily strength and skill the youth must recover faith in the unconquerableness of his nation.”⁷ Here Hitler brings forth the idea that the most important thing for youth is to follow Nazi ideology, but also stresses that the physical aspect of their training is important to achieve this. Passages concerning youth in *Mein Kampf*, such as this one, give the impression that Hitler wanted the youth cultivated into people operating in true National Socialist spirit.

Being a true National Socialist in Hitler’s view required many things. Firstly, one should be convinced of the German people’s absolute superiority over others. Secondly, one should be willing to serve the people and the state, even if this meant sacrificing your life, because the ultimate cause of German people was to live and work for the good of the nation. All Germans had to be in an excellent state physically, and this was directly related to the broad idea about superiority and conquering other nations. Even though a person might have claimed to be a Nazi and have this ideology, in practice it meant a strict code of conduct. A Nazi should have ruthlessly denounced anyone who they thought or knew to be Jewish, since this was one of the key points in ideology. An individual had to express keen interest in the Party, its history, and follow any orders that might come from higher officials. Although each and every one of these points applied to all Germans, Hitler placed especial stress on the indoctrination of the youth, because after all, they were the ones who would determine the future of the Third Reich [*Reich* is German for ‘empire’]. Hence the Nazi slogan: “Whoever has the youth, has the future.”⁸

3. The Effects of Nazi Involvement in Schools

3.1 Education

“The nation State must direct its education work, in the first place, not so much towards pumping in mere knowledge as towards cultivating thoroughly healthy bodies. After that comes development of mental capability. Here again formation of character comes first, especially encouragement of will-

⁷ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (London: Hurst & Blackett, Ltd., 1933-1938) p.162.

⁸ Eric A. Johnson, *Nazi Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) p.262.

power and determination, combined with teaching the joy of assuming responsibility, and not till last comes schooling in pure knowledge.”⁹

This view had far-reaching consequences on the German youth, because the idea was applied in schools everywhere. Hitler was convinced of the importance of physical education in schools, and he expressed his wish that a minimum of one hour of bodily exercise each day be conducted. However, a by-product of this policy was that the start of a boy-army was being formed. Whether this was really an aim is hard to say decisively, but surely being fit helped in the further military training acquired in the Hitler Youth and army.

The staff in schools saw many changes after the proclamation of the Hitler Youth Law in 1936, when Hitler Youth became the sole state youth organization. Hitler Youth officials began replacing teachers and hence schooling quickly went through drastic changes. Teachers lost near to all of their authority in schools and “intellectual culture was reduced to a minimum.”¹⁰ School now mostly meant physical education and this was widely disliked by the youth.¹¹ The increasing resistance against schools had the effect of driving youth towards the Hitler Youth organization, which did not concern itself with physical education, but rather with military exercises. As a result, school quickly lost its importance and some boys soon considered the Jungvolk or Hitler Youth proper as their real school.¹²

The state had therefore managed to undermine the schooling system by introducing new and unwanted programmes. When the indoctrination in a part of schools proved ineffective, the youth simply started rallying to Hitler Youth instead of concentrating on their education. This can also be considered as a reason for the initial interest and growing membership of Hitler Youth.

3.2 A Growing Organization

In the very early days of Hitler Youth some educators had been alarmed by the attractiveness of Nazism to certain adolescents, detecting in it “something irrational, infectious, that makes the blood beat in the veins.”¹³ It cannot be denied that some did find Nazism very captivating indeed and

⁹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (London: Hurst & Blackett, Ltd., 1933-1938) p.160.

¹⁰ Pierre Ayçoberry, *The Social History of the Third Reich* (New York: The New Press, 1999) p.210.

¹¹ Jurgen Herbst, *Requiem for a German Past* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999) p.91.

¹² *ibid.* p.81.

¹³ Pierre Ayçoberry, *The Social History of the Third Reich* (New York: The New Press, 1999) p.182.

were most likely eager to join the Hitler Youth as well. However, it must also be remembered that the Hitler Youth did not manage to recruit many new members before Hitler himself started coordinating the task. The approximate 100,000 members who had joined by then were mostly a minority of fanatics who were probably strong supporters of Nazism. Even though these were the original voluntary members of Hitler Youth, others later on were not sorry to join. Through propaganda and speeches Hitler expressed his wishes concerning the youth and emphasized the importance of Hitler Youth. However, the organization was portrayed more as a club for leisure and attracted many members because of this, to some extent, false image. “The work of conversion was carried on not so much through ideas as through live experiences and constant appeals to excel, which camouflaged the harshness of the system by seemingly satisfying the youthful need for dynamism.”¹⁴

Perhaps surprisingly, even when the Hitler Youth had become obligatory, it still held “undeniable attractions for large numbers of German children and teenagers.”¹⁵ The association organized holidays and hiking outings and sponsored sporting and leisure-time activities. Hitler Youth and especially Jungvolk felt appealing to boys who saw this as the chance to play war games instead of concentrating on school. To them, serving the state meant marching, singing, and primarily having fun. From the very start, Hitler Youth encouraged its members to defy the authority of their parents and teachers, and they certainly took this advice to heart. Parents could no longer insist that their children study like before, as the members of Hitler Youth had duties decided by higher authorities than their parents. Due to these various reasons – or, more accurately, incentives – in the early years of its existence Hitler Youth remained a growing organization.

5. Military Formation of Youth: Success

Hitler had created the youth associations on the basis of his general set of principles, which in practice meant that the aims were very much the same as in schools; the most important one being indoctrination. However, Hitler Youth differed in the way that military exercises were also conducted from the very beginning in addition to political education. The military part was a secondary motive of the organization all along, never the defining feature, because “the essential

¹⁴ Pierre Ayçoberry, *The Social History of the Third Reich* (New York: The New Press, 1999) p.184.

¹⁵ Eric A. Johnson, *Nazi Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) p.265.

task [...] was to prepare these young people to be loyal followers of the führer.”¹⁶ After schools had lost their importance in the lives of German youth, participating in the activities of Hitler Youth became increasingly attractive. The organization was by no means a meaningless affair, but the boys seem to have respected it for different reasons than they should have. A former member of Jungvolk, Jurgen Herbst, writes: “I had poured all my energies into my career in the Jungvolk. This, I thought, was the perfect introduction to an officer’s life, far more pertinent to the skills and experiences required in the army than anything school could give me.”¹⁷

Hitler Youth proper and Jungvolk both operated in all towns and consisted of various groups in each location. The groups held meetings and carried out different duties, whether these were just to march around town or help in the war effort. The organizations operated after school-hours and participating in the activities took up much of the children’s time. The tasks undertaken in Hitler Youth also consisted of the two different parts, indoctrination and military training. Indoctrination was already carried out at schools and was also accorded much time in the Hitler Youth. In the obligatory meetings, the members would listen to lectures on Hitler, the Nazi Party or attend courses on “raciology.”¹⁸ Other times, the children themselves would discuss and debate about topics prescribed by the Party. The remaining time in the Hitler Youth was allocated to the military training, which consisted of exercises any normal army would conduct, such as “shooting practice, field manoeuvres, courses for radio operators, even gliding and sailing.”¹⁹

What the young boys particularly loved about the association, was that at least Jungvolk engaged in mock battles from time to time, as well as providing “exciting adventure” and the possibility for “war games.”²⁰ This might illuminate the real reason for the attractiveness of Hitler Youth to some members even though they could have detested indoctrination. Hitler Youth let boys play adults and as Herbst says: “It gave me responsibility at a young age and taught me what it meant to become a leader of men. It was the comradeship of us boys and the awareness of duties the war imposed upon us that sustained my enthusiasm and made life meaningful.”²¹ These boy-soldiers found themselves with increasing duties after the start of the war, including such things as “standing fire watch during air-raids and helping with clean-up work thereafter.”²²

¹⁶ *ibid.* p.184.

¹⁷ Jurgen Herbst, *Requiem for a German Past* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999) p.23.

¹⁸ Pierre Ayçoberry, *The Social History of the Third Reich* (New York: The New Press, 1999) p.184.

¹⁹ *ibid.* p.183.

²⁰ Jurgen Herbst, *Requiem for a German Past* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999) p.24.

²¹ *ibid.* p.81.

²² *ibid.* p.88.

Instead of lectures on the history of the party, “the youthful German public were keen on war stories and particularly interested in technical weaponry, tanks, submarines, and airplanes. As they grew older those who remained in towns were increasingly drawn into the war effort.”²³ Herbst describes the Jungvolk’s interest in “adventure and war stories” as never ending. Technical weaponry was a great source of curiosity to the boys and according to Herbst: “paramilitary exercises suited us just fine. Afternoons at a rifle range, with BB guns for the boys and .22 calibre rifles for us leaders, sparked our enthusiasm.”²⁴

The Hitler Youth proved to be a much-needed reserve force when the fear of losing the war started concerning authorities. It was not supposed to be an extension of the army, but at the prolongation of the Second World War, the losses in the ranks of the army continued to mount and officials turned to Hitler Youth for new recruits. New men were chosen solely for their fighting qualities and this was to be the unfortunate end of many who joined.²⁵ Up to ten thousand who joined at this stage gave their lives in Normandy.²⁶ These were not all fanatics, obsessed to serve the Nazi state, but rather volunteers waiting for a chance to show their ability in military services and get a head-start in their future army careers.²⁷ This shows that to a part of the members of Hitler Youth, the army was already their life.

An interesting observation is pointed out by Ayçoberry, that “when young men emerging from the Hitler-Jugend [Hitler Youth] were asked what kind of jobs they would aim for in peacetime, most mentioned industry or the army, a few spoke of the SS [Schutzstaffel; a large paramilitary organisation that was a principal component of the Nazi Party], very few considered working for the party agencies.”²⁸

6. Nazi Indoctrination in the Hitler Youth

²³ Pierre Ayçoberry, *The Social History of the Third Reich* (New York: The New Press, 1999) p.211.

²⁴ Jurgen Herbst, *Requiem for a German Past* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999) p.91.

²⁵ Pierre Ayçoberry, *The Social History of the Third Reich* (New York: The New Press, 1999) p.313.

²⁶ *ibid.* p.211.

²⁷ Jurgen Herbst registered as a volunteer for military activities at a young age and writes about it in *Requiem for a German Past* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999) p.99.

²⁸ Pierre Ayçoberry, *The Social History of the Third Reich* (New York: The New Press, 1999) p.256.

The State insisted that those children privileged enough to belong to the Hitler Youth – that is, everyone in the end – should give something in return. The State wanted to break the children from the early framework of their lives and the youth was therefore encouraged to distance themselves from the church, schools, and even their families.²⁹ This was a crucial part of indoctrination because authorities believed that without the influence of parents, children would be converted into Nazis. Serving the community, not family, was now the most important thing according to the State. Various policies in connection to indoctrination were instated, but most of these had an effect contrary to what was hoped for. Some plans backfired instantly, such as those restricting the freedom of youths.

Although Hitler Youth was popular to some extent in the beginning, resistance appeared against it when its true nature started unfolding. Koch writes: “Legions of new members who had joined only out of obligation and many others who had joined voluntarily came to resent the drill, regimentation, political indoctrination, enforced uniformity, and lack of freedom and individual expression that Hitler Youth membership mandated.”³⁰ The resistance towards Hitler Youth indoctrination increased later on as new rules and morals were introduced. “Smoking, drinking, partying, and sex were frowned on, even criminalized eventually,” which meant that in the long run teenagers were just more tempted to resort to illegal activities.³¹ As if this had not been enough to anger youth, the “Nazi state depended on Hitler Youth patrols to enforce the puritanical restrictions.”³² Youth was now also spying on itself and this development was definitely not greeted with much enthusiasm. In addition to spying in the hope of illegal activities, the patrol service also kept new recruits under surveillance. All this caused a “radical shift of attitude among the young from initial attraction to growing rejection.”³³ The growing rejection could also be seen in the increasing strength of *bündisch*, or independent youth groups, which were actually illegal after 1936.

Among some youngsters the Nazi mentality had not caught on, as Herbst expresses in his memoir of Jungvolk times. Certain events definitely show some carelessness for the rules, such as: “Nothing pleased us [his close members of Jungvolk] more than to parody a Nazi-approved theme.” They

²⁹ *ibid.* p.210.

³⁰ H.W. Koch, *The Hitler Youth* (London: Macdonald and Company (Publishers) Ltd., 1975) p.265.

³¹ *ibid.* p.266.

³² *ibid.* p.266.

³³ *ibid.* p.267.

also loved to try out songs that were strictly forbidden, such as Communist battle hymns.³⁴ This implies that even though the children knew the limits of the boundaries set for them, they were not afraid to cross them and defy Nazi ideology at the same time. The event might seem harmless, but since they had been subjected to indoctrination for all their lives, why would this idea ever even have occurred to them?

This leads to the realization that at least a part of the members “seem to have emerged militarized rather than nazified.”³⁵ A substantial amount of disregard for politics developed in the Jungvolk and Herbst writes that they did not care about “Nazi ideology, party history, and Hitler’s life” which all members had to be near to experts in.³⁶ One incident he describes is such, that to popular discontent of some ranks in the Jungvolk, boring discussion on party-prescribed topics ceased.³⁷ Even Hitler himself admitted being “alarmed at the disappointing attitude of members.”³⁸ The present indoctrination methods were clearly not producing the correct results and therefore authorities concluded that the extent to which children were controlled had to be increased. The Nazi leadership should probably have been worried earlier on when children “were not at all pleased at efforts to make them wear swastika armbands.”³⁹

During the war the State started trying new tactics to indoctrinate the children, because they felt that parents still had too much influence over them. In 1940, a vast operation called “sending the children to the countryside” was launched.⁴⁰ Officially, the reason was the need to get children away from air-raids and other wartime troubles. However, this was really a renewed political strategy of the National Socialists, who were trying harder this time to detach young children from their families. Parents and teachers were thought to be too traditional and instead the children were subjected to influences of the SS and the Hitler Youth organization.

It seems that this campaign was hardly more influential than the previous indoctrination attempts. Most children never broke completely with their family as the State had intended. For example, this can be seen in the fact that youths were urged to denounce adults, even their parents, but “few

³⁴ Jurgen Herbst, *Requiem for a German Past* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999) p.93.

³⁵ Pierre Ayçoberry, *The Social History of the Third Reich* (New York: The New Press, 1999) p.211.

³⁶ Jurgen Herbst, *Requiem for a German Past* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999) p.91.

³⁷ *ibid.* p.91.

³⁸ Pierre Ayçoberry, *The Social History of the Third Reich* (New York: The New Press, 1999) p.211.

³⁹ *ibid.* p.211.

⁴⁰ *ibid.* p.209.

young people acted as denouncers.”⁴¹ Surely, some youths did make denunciations, but this was very rare and not at all the extensive spying that the State wanted.⁴²

7. Conclusion

Things were not going the way Hitler had planned, because he admitted being worried about youth and how it was responding negatively towards some aspects of Nazism. Widespread resistance towards politics became a serious problem for the Nazi government and one which had to be tackled quickly. From this situation campaigns directed against parent influence were conceived, but even they seemed to be to no avail. The primary aim of Hitler Youth was indoctrination, but Nazi ideology was not greeted with enthusiasm among German youth. Military formation, on the other hand, was a secondary motive of the organization from the very start. Further study on the topic might provide more case studies, but would most likely not lead to a significantly different conclusion.

Before considering the extent to which these aims were attained, something must be clarified. Nazi ideology included aspects such as serving the people and state and being in excellent physical condition. However, both of these also relate to the aim of military training, since it required good physical condition and involved certain duties – peace and war-time – benefiting the community. Although these are related to general Nazi ideology, they were more strictly part of military formation. A part of the youth also volunteered for service in the army – perhaps interpreted as true Nazism – but they may just have been interested in a military career. These examples illustrate that there was no bold line separating the two aims and this might have lead to different interpretations in the sources.

This is not to say that the problem was always present. In some cases the aim of a certain activity could be distinguished easily and conclusions could be formed about it. Racial ideology, lectures on the Party and its history were of course related to the aim of indoctrination. The remaining aspects of Nazi ideology – serving the state and being in good physical condition – can be related to both. Since the military exercises were enjoyed by most of the youth, a part of Nazi ideology was

⁴¹ Eric A. Johnson, *Nazi Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) p. 369.

⁴² In *ibid.* p.369, Eric Johnson writes of a study conducted for the book, in which 1,132 randomly selected Gestapo and Special Court cases were analyzed, ranging through years 1933-1945. In those cases, not one parent was denounced by their underage child, and only one pupil denounced a teacher, and he later recanted his denunciation.

therefore successful after all. Apart from the minority of fanatics who supported racial ideology, no studies could be found for this investigation that would have conclusively proved that the rest of the youth also supported this.

The reasons for the failure of indoctrination can only be guessed. Some members probably hated it all along, and perhaps the strictness of Hitler Youth discouraged others. However, this is largely speculation and one must conclude that myriad factors contributed to the resistance against Nazi indoctrination. It must also be kept in mind that the members of Hitler Youth were not simply divided into two different camps, one in favour of the Nazi Party and the other of the military. There were most likely persons who did not support either one to a great extent but were members just because it was compulsory. However, from the scope of the research conducted for this study the following conclusions can be reached: military formation sparked the enthusiasm of a large part of Hitler Youth's members, while politics and Nazi ideology never gained a firm stand among the youth.

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