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# Education in Nazi Germany

## **Abstract**

This essay investigates the sweeping educational reforms that the Nazi government implemented to use elementary education to further its political goals. Along with the major laws concerned, it concentrates on several personal accounts of families and students during this era to better understand how these educational reforms affected Germans. Additionally, it analyzes the Hitler Youth and other such recreational organizations that the Nazis created to continue to mold students' ideologies. It examines the stories of several people who were children in these organizations and what their impressions were of the groups. Finally, it places these Nazi reforms in the context of the post-1945 period of denazification and reconstruction.

## **Keywords**

Nazism, German Education, Elementary Education, Hitler Youth, League of German Girls

## **Disciplines**

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# EDUCATION IN NAZI GERMANY

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Ian James  
Dr. Bowman  
HIST 418  
3 May 2019

I affirm that I will uphold the highest principles of honesty and integrity in all my endeavors at Gettysburg College and foster an atmosphere of mutual respect within and beyond the classroom.

Under the Nazi regime, the government made concerted efforts to reform the elementary educational system. Designed to promote Nazi ideologies and foster a love for the Third Reich, some programs were more influential than others. By examining the changes that the Nazis made inside and beyond the classroom and how students and teachers reacted to these modifications, one can better understand how the Nazi regime altered elementary education in Germany.

The Nazis recognized the crucial role that education played in shaping young Germans' views. They believed that they could effectively indoctrinate their youth to support their national socialist goals. Government officials devised reforms in the educational system to ensure that educators adhered to Nazi ideologies.<sup>1</sup> Outside the classroom, the Nazi regime created extra-curricular groups such as the Hitler Youth (*Hitlerjugend*) and the League of German Girls (*Bund Deutscher Mädel*) to propagate further their ideologies. These various reforms affected each level of the educational structure, but the elementary foundation of the system was particularly important since it equipped students for their continued education.<sup>2</sup>

Historians have consistently noted the importance of education in Nazi Germany. Therefore, there is a large body of scholarship on the topic. In addition to recognizing this subject's importance, historians have generally reached the consensus that the Nazis implemented a multitude of reforms to shape education to meet their political goals. Accordingly, the scholarship differs on how effective these educational reforms were in various localities across Germany and the many obstacles these reforms faced. Furthermore, historians vary on their approaches of

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<sup>1</sup> William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 248-256; Photograph on Title Page: *Group Portrait of Children in Peine, Germany, 1928-1932*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1140530>.

<sup>2</sup> Gilmer W. Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich* (Albany, NY: University of New York Press, 1985), 85, 103-104, 113; Lisa Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany* (New York: Berg, 2010), 5, 21-22, 95-113, 127-128, 139.

analyzing this topic. While some scholars focus on a top-down approach, interpreting the Nazi government's overarching reforms and the grand politics of the time, others have conducted case studies of teachers, students, and others who worked in schools or participated in extra-curricular activities. There is merit to these various approaches, and this essay will use a variety of scholarship to demonstrate further the effects that the Nazi regime had on the German educational system.

Earlier historians placed paramount emphasis on the men in charge of the educational system and the overarching reforms. William L. Shirer's 1960 text *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, for example, indicated that Dr. Bernhard Rust, the Reich Minister of Science, Education, and Popular Culture, was a prominent driving force in Nazi educational reforms.<sup>3</sup> In his top-down approach to this topic, Shirer contended that under Dr. Rust's leadership, massive reforms revamped German education by ousting non-party members from teaching positions, rewriting text books, and degrading the overall quality of learning. Shirer declared, "The result of so much Nazification was catastrophic for German education and for German learning."<sup>4</sup>

Like Shirer, historian I. L. Kandel demonstrated that massive Nazi reforms and the men behind them were the issues for German education. In his 1935 publication, *The Making of Nazis*, Kandel analyzed how Nazi reforms altered education at the outset of the Third Reich. He believed that the core beliefs of the Nazi regime were instrumental in shaping education. He contended that a political orthodoxy of racial purity and an unconditional love for the fatherland were at the crux of Nazi educational reforms.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Kandel recognized that Dr. Rust was the catalyst for radical changes. He wrote, "The reorganization of education is governed by the principle of

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<sup>3</sup> Shirer, *The Rise*, 248.

<sup>4</sup> Shirer, *The Rise*, 250.

<sup>5</sup> I. L. Kandel, *The Making of Nazis* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1935), 8-10.

politicization, the development of unquestioning loyalty and submissive acceptance of the new régime.”<sup>6</sup> In his estimation, high-ranking actors were responsible for implementing sweeping change in the school system.

Gilmer W. Blackburn also fell into this first group of historians. In his 1985 book *Education in the Third Reich*, he approached Nazi education from the top of the system. He placed primary blame on Hitler for the reforms in German education: “Determined from the beginning to take absolute control of the nation, the Nazi Führer reserved for the schools the important task of refashioning the German psyche.”<sup>7</sup> His narrative followed a trickle-down style, where subordinate Nazi officials executed Hitler’s desires for educational reform. While Blackburn believed that these changes were mammoth, he concluded that they were ultimately reversed during the post-1945 period.<sup>8</sup> In his assessment, reformers quickly eradicated Nazi educational ideologies after the Second World War. Despite the relative ease of reversing school curricula, he claimed “That the educational impact of Hitlerian ideas was transitory does not mean that they were insignificant.”<sup>9</sup>

While other historians continued to analyze the great men of the Nazi regime, later histories had more nuanced social history frameworks. Jill Stephenson’s 2001 book *Women in Nazi Germany*, for instance, examined German education through women’s experiences. Stephenson’s work drew from individual experiences to inform the larger narrative of education. For example, in her chapter “Education, Socialization, Organization” she included excerpts from women’s memoirs about their involvement in Nazi social organizations. Much of her research illuminated

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<sup>6</sup> Kandel, *The Making of Nazis*, 58.

<sup>7</sup> Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich*, i.

<sup>8</sup> Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich*, i-iii.

<sup>9</sup> Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich*, 184.

women's history during the Third Reich, a topic that had been generally neglected in earlier interpretations.<sup>10</sup>

Lisa Pine approached the topic of education similarly to Stephenson. In her book *Education in Nazi Germany*, she noted the interconnection between school and youth groups as most students were involved in both. Pine believed that interpreting one topic independently of the other offered an incomplete interpretation. With a more distinct social history framework, she analyzed the educational system and youth organizations through the experiences of the adults and children involved.<sup>11</sup>

Drawing from both the earlier historians' works and the more contemporary scholarship, this essay will investigate the grand politics of Nazi educational reform. It will focus on several major changes in the German educational system during the Nazi era, how the German public supported or disagreed with these changes, and how these reforms were reflected in society. Additionally, it will analyze the formation and success of Nazi youth groups to offer a holistic representation of children's academic and extra-curricular education. Further, it will examine individual case studies to determine to what degree these overarching reforms were successfully implemented in the actual school system.

Prior to the Nazi regime, Germany had a reputation for quality education. In the nineteenth century, educational reformers such as Adolf Diesterweg, Wilhelm Humboldt, Johann Freidrich Herbart, and Georg Kershensteiner, among many others, strived to create universal and quality education for the German public. While Germany was fragmented into various duchies during this era, they generally shared these similar goals for education.<sup>12</sup> Whereas most reformers agreed

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<sup>10</sup> Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany* (New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 70-93.

<sup>11</sup> Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 7-12; Kandel, *The Making of Nazis*, 33-34.

that the prevalence and substance of education should be increased, there remained considerable debate over how education ought to be disseminated across the social classes. Liberals demanded equal classroom instruction regardless of social background, and conservatives feared that this style of education would create social unrest and class friction.<sup>13</sup> This debate came to a head during the revolution of 1848 when teachers struck, demanding more pay and opportunities for students. There continued to be bureaucratic strife, but educational policy in Germany generally took a more egalitarian approach in the latter part of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

The curricula during the pre-Nazi era placed an emphasis on a classical education, yet the hard sciences also flourished during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Europe, Germany was a leader in scientific research during this era. For instance, institutions in Berlin, Bonn, Leipzig, Munich, and Göttingen made tremendous strides in chemistry.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, there was increasing intensity of militaristic thought in the classroom leading to the First World War. Overall, Germany enjoyed a reputation across Europe and the world as one of the most sophisticated educational systems from Kindergarten through its universities.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Germany's educational system was so renowned that the Japanese modeled their Imperial educational system after it.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, this exceptional educational system would not endure during the Nazi era. Hitler had definite intentions for education in his Germany. In a speech he delivered on November

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<sup>13</sup> Marjorie Lamberti, *State, Society, and the Elementary School in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 21.

<sup>14</sup> Lamberti, *State, Society, and the Elementary School*, 26-32.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey A. Johnson, "Academic Chemistry in Imperial Germany," *Isis* 76, no. 4 (December 1985): 501.

<sup>16</sup> Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 7-12; Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich*, i-iii; Lamberti, *State, Society, and the Elementary School*, 20-26.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Duke, *The History of Modern Japanese Education* (Camden, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 314-347.



6, 1933, he stated, “When an opponent declares, ‘I will not come over to your side,’ I calmly say, ‘Your child belongs to us already ... What are you? You will pass on. Your descendants, however, now stand in the new camp. In a short time they will know nothing else but this new community.’”<sup>18</sup> In 1937, he reasserted his intentions for the educational system: “This new Reich will give its youth to no one, but will itself take youth and give to youth its own education and upbringing.”<sup>19</sup> Hitler put his men in charge of the educational system in order to realize these visions, but he was met with logistical and ideological resistance. Blackburn stated, “The difficulties [Hitler] encountered in altering an educational system that was second to none in Europe and was reinforced by a strong tradition of academic integrity should not be minimalized.”<sup>20</sup> By analyzing these difficulties, one can better understand how Germans reacted to various Nazi educational reforms.

From the outset of the Nazi regime, educators were concerned about government policy changes. In an environment where the free sharing of ideas was suppressed, foreign observers often spoke for those who could not. Educators Mr. Vivian Ogilvie, Professor I. L. Kandel, and Professor Albrecht Geotze witnessed initial Nazi educational reforms and issued warnings against the totalitarian regimes. Their texts and stories revealed that educators in the system were not naïve about Hitler’s intentions.

The 1934 pamphlet, *Education Under Hitler*, published by the Friends of Europe was a call to action against the Nazi regime. Written by Mr. Ogilvie, an English elementary school teacher who had worked in Germany, this piece was an outsider’s interpretation of the educational reforms in Nazi Germany. Mr. Ogilvie described his aims in publishing this pamphlet. “Far more

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<sup>18</sup> Shirer, *The Rise*, 249.

<sup>19</sup> Shirer, *The Rise*, 249.

<sup>20</sup> Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich*, i.

important than anything Hitler may say under pressure of circumstances is the sort of teaching actually given to the coming generation in Germany.”<sup>21</sup> He claimed that this system of education could have international ramifications; “The urgent point is this: does a self-conscious and aggrieved national megalomania, based on compulsory ignorance, compulsory falsehoods, the abolition of the individual’s right to form opinions for himself and a scrupulous prevention of intellectual contact with the rest of the world, breed a state of mind favorable to peace?”<sup>22</sup> Although a brief publication, *Education Under Hitler* revealed several concerning practices in German education that were alarming to non-Germans as early as 1933.

Mr. Ogilvie identified a number of suspicious reforms that had affected the educational system in Germany. First, he noticed that the higher-ranking ministers of education had all been replaced by Nazi party members, and that teachers had gradually been replaced by Nazis as well. During this transitional process, “Nazis were sent to schools, walked into the classes and cross-examined the teacher before his pupils and, if they thought necessary, arrested him at once.”<sup>23</sup> Mr. Ogilvie also recorded that the principal of the elementary school where he worked compared Hitler’s election to the second coming of Jesus, a worrisome allusion for the British educator.<sup>24</sup> Further in the pamphlet Mr. Ogilvie stated, “Many Jewish children have been sent home from school.”<sup>25</sup> Additionally, he described *Vaterländische Stunde*, a weekly lesson “devoted to the Treaty of Versailles, to the crimes of the Allies, the Jews and Communists, and to the Great

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<sup>21</sup> Ogilvie, *Education*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ogilvie, *Education*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Ogilvie, *Education*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ogilvie, *Education*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Ogilvie, *Education*, 8.

Germans.”<sup>26</sup> With these lessons, the Nazis were deliberately using schools for propaganda purposes as early as 1933.

Published in 1935, *The Making of Nazis* was an American educator’s interpretation of initial Nazi reforms.<sup>27</sup> Professor Kandel was disturbed by the radical changes that the Nazis were making. He asserted, “National Socialism fundamentally means the reestablishment of the totalitarian state, far more penetrating, far more pervasive, and far more all-embracing than anything that was conceived of under the Imperial regime.”<sup>28</sup> Like Ogilvie, Professor Kandel recognized the Nazis’ sinister intentions from the outset of their regime.

In the chapter “Educational Theory,” Professor Kandel examined the Nazis’ goals for education. He argued that the National Socialist educational theory stressed obedience and physical fitness over academics. Summarizing the Nazi theory on education, he wrote:

Education must accordingly be given an important place in the new social order, not the kind of education which prevailed before the War with its stress on knowledge rather than power, on intellectualism rather than character, on encyclopedism rather than a strong will. This resulted in the defeat of the nation ... Courses should be reduced to minimum essentials so that more time should be left for more important work – physical education and history, which the Germans need than other people, and vocational preparation. But the teaching of history must be completely changed, for “History is not studied in order to know the past but in order to use it as a guide for the future and for the preservation of one’s own people.” Ultimately the best history will be a world history in which the race question is given a dominant place.<sup>29</sup>

Although a summation of Nazi educational doctrine, this section offered insight on how the Nazis wanted to use education for indoctrination. Following these axioms, the Nazis reformed school

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<sup>26</sup> Ogilvie, *Education*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Underscoring the severe Nazi attitudes towards dissenters, Professor Kandel could not cite all the people from whom he collected information in order to protect their identities. Kandel, *The Making of Nazis*, v.

<sup>28</sup> Kandel, *The Making of Nazis*, 3-4.

<sup>29</sup> Kandel, *The Making of Nazis*, 39-40.

administrations, replaced officials with Nazi party members, and consolidated regional authority in Berlin.<sup>30</sup>

These two previous accounts offered outsiders' perspectives on Nazi reform during the early years of the regime. The Goetze family's tribulations illustrated the affects these Nazi reforms had on an academic German family. Albrecht Goetze was a German professor at Marburg University during the 1920s and 1930s, whose family had a long tradition of academics in the area.<sup>31</sup> For instance, Dr. Rudolf Geotze, Albrecht Geotze's father, had personally worked with Sigmund Freud. In addition to this academic legacy, Professor Geotze served in the German armed forces during the First World War, underscoring his patriotic attitudes towards his nation. These nationalist sentiments, however, did not prevent him from denouncing the Nazis.<sup>32</sup> Before the 1933 election, he wrote and printed handbills rebuking the Nazis, whom he believed were nefarious political tyrants. Initial Nazi reforms did not directly target institutions of higher learning, but Hitler soon directed his attention to universities since many students and professors, such as Professor Geotze, protested Nazi leadership. In 1933, the Nazis deemed Professor Geotze to be politically unreliable and ousted him from his professorship.<sup>33</sup>

The Geotzes faced dangerous retaliation from the Nazis following this decision. That same year, Nazi party members surrounded the Geotze household and threw bricks through the windows while shouting obscenities. Professor Geotze's young daughter recalled having to push a dresser and other heavy furniture in front of the windows to protect the family. Fortunately, Professor

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<sup>30</sup> Kandel, *The Making of Nazis*, 56-61, 92-94.

<sup>31</sup> The Goetze family had roots in the Leipzig area dating from the 1500s. John Pfeiffer, interview by author, Gettysburg, PA, April 6, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Pfeiffer, interview.

<sup>33</sup> Kandel, *The Making of Nazis*, 5; Pfeiffer, interview; Jacob Finkelstein, "Albrecht Goetze, 1897-1971," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 92, no. 2 (April-June 1972): 197; Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 33-36; Shirer, *The Rise*, 248-256.

Geotze gained a professorship at Yale University in 1934. He escaped Nazi Germany, and his family followed him soon thereafter. Although the Geotze family was able to escape Nazi Germany before the Nazis retaliated further, not all families in academia had positive endings.<sup>34</sup>

Along with issues with the government, Professor Geotze faced challenges with his family. He and his wife had three children, two of whom were in elementary school during this period. Having started his developmental years in Nazi-controlled classes, Professor Geotze's son constantly fought with his parents over Nazi ideologies. Not only did the professor have to battle the university and the government, but also he had to handle his children who were being indoctrinated by the militaristic culture that he denounced. This inter-generational conflict was recurrent in families across Germany.<sup>35</sup> Professor Geotze's tribulations were not uncommon. Nearly a quarter of German university professors lost their positions during the initial years of the Third Reich. However, as Professor Wilhelm Roepke, one of Professor Geotze's colleagues at the University of Marburg, noted, the percentage of professors dismissed for expressly defying the Nazi government was "“exceedingly small.”"<sup>36</sup> Both Professor Geotze and Professor Roepke recognized that the Nazis were attacking dissentients. Many others like them realized that the Nazis were changing the educational system to meet political goals.<sup>37</sup>

These early educational reforms upset the traditional school system and caused alarm for German and foreign educators alike. These examples from the earliest years of the Nazi regime demonstrated that people were concerned about educational changes globally. However, it is important to note that one quarter of teachers were Nazi party members in the early 1930s, and

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<sup>34</sup> Pfeiffer, interview; Finkelstein, "Albrecht Goetze," 200.

<sup>35</sup> Pfeiffer, interview.

<sup>36</sup> Shirer, *The Rise*, 251.

<sup>37</sup> Kandel, *The Making of Nazis*, 39-40.

they welcomed Nazi reforms because they saw this change as an opportunity to reverse Weimar policies that had led to unemployment and poor school funding. Whereas many educators were eager to welcome a regime that promised change and prestige, the Nazis' later policies disillusioned many teachers who had originally supported the party with good intentions.<sup>38</sup> During the remainder of the Nazi era, Hitler and his staff continued to distort education to meet their needs.

Generally, the Nazis placed a greater emphasis on *Erlebnis* (Experience) over *Wissenschaft* (learning) in schools. They believed that text-book knowledge was not as important as cultivating cultural bonds and forging a new national identity. The Nazi Minister of Education believed in this doctrine and stressed these new values in an address delivered to students at the University of Berlin:

We cannot fight our way out of this deep crisis through intellectualism, rather an extraordinary test of character must come first to establish who in future has the right to bear the name of German citizen in Germany ... the true, great, practical school is not over there (the University), and not in the grammar schools, it is in the labor camp, for here instruction and words cease and action begins.<sup>39</sup>

Since these ideals conflicted with educational standards prior to the Nazi era, textbooks and other teaching material had to be rewritten. The government required educators to attend classes for accelerated courses on Nazi doctrine, especially the newly incorporated racial studies. Furthermore, teachers and administrators were coerced to join the National Socialist Teacher's League. These changes were designed to revamp the educational system by removing educators who contradicted Nazism.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Noakes, *Nazism 1919-1945 Volume 2: State, Economy, and Society 1933-1939*, 238-239.

<sup>39</sup> Noakes, *Nazism 1919-1945 Volume 2: State, Economy, and Society 1933-1939*, 247.

<sup>40</sup> Shirer, *The Rise*, 248-249.

During the Third Reich, the Nazis passed an exhaustive register of reforms aimed to restructure German education. The 1933 Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service forbade Jewish persons from holding any teaching or administrative position in schools. In 1934, the government dissolved parents' councils and reinstated school headmasters as the central authorities for school districts. Later laws such as the 1937 Civil Service Act formally required teachers to follow the government's orders and promote Nazi ideology unquestionably.<sup>41</sup> Between 1938 and 1942, the government passed dozens of laws that continued to consolidate power in the national government, reduce the number of schools, and alter curricula to promote racial sciences and other propaganda. After 1942 there were markedly fewer reforms since much of the government's attention was devoted to the war effort and executing the Final Solution.<sup>42</sup>

One of the most striking additions to Nazi school curricula was racial sciences. These courses, offered at nearly all grade levels, were designed to disseminate Nazi propaganda. Teachers instructed students to recognize Jewish people by physical attributes such as noses and lip structures. These distinctions dehumanized the Jews, making Nazi doctrine easier to project upon them.<sup>43</sup> Paul Brohmer was a Nazi who wrote textbooks for this new subject of racial biology. His books stressed racial purity and offered pseudoscientific classifications for ethnicities. Along with these textbooks, there were thousands of slides, films, and posters created to demonstrate the differences between true Aryan Germans and others deemed inferior. These racial sciences demonstrated how the Third Reich manipulated education to further the state's goals.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Shirer, *The Rise*, 249; Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 26-27.

<sup>42</sup> Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 27.

<sup>43</sup> Noakes, *Nazism 1919-1945 Volume 2: State, Economy, and Society 1933-1939*, 349.

<sup>44</sup> Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 42.

Various reforms such as these were designed to mold education to meet the Nazis' political targets. Since Nazi doctrine engendered misogyny, the German educational system was redesigned to offer different instruction to boys and girls. Whereas there was little distinction between the sexes' classroom experiences at the elementary level, women's education in later years stressed feminine skills aimed "to prepare them unconditionally for their career as mothers."<sup>45</sup> Because domestic work did not require high levels of formal education, the Nazi government discouraged women from entering universities through propaganda and legal means.<sup>46</sup>

In 1933, the National Socialist government created quotas at the university level to prevent women from gaining advanced degrees. Additionally, the government forbade women from gaining teaching certifications. The decision to bar women from universities ultimately led to a critical dearth of qualified medical personnel, among other positions, during the Second World War. Like many bigoted policies in the Third Reich, this restrictive policy caused the regime unforeseen consequences. Despite these earlier efforts to prevent women from entering universities, war-time policies were more lenient. They permitted female enrollment to grow from ten per cent to over sixty per cent due to the critical need for more educated people since most educated men were conscripted for military service.<sup>47</sup>

At the younger elementary age, girls were expected to gain feminine skills through their participation in the League of German Girls and through their mothers' instruction.<sup>48</sup> National Socialism reinforced what some scholars have dubbed the four K's: *Küche, Kleider, Kinder, und Kirche* (cooking, clothing, children, and church). While there was less subtlety in this

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<sup>45</sup> Kandel, *The Making of Nazis*, 40.

<sup>46</sup> Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*, 70-72; Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 27-28.

<sup>47</sup> Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*, 70-72; Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 28; Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich*, 108.

<sup>48</sup> Shirer, *The Rise*, 252-255.



interpretation than what Nazism actually reinforced, since Nazi doctrine stressed motherhood and womanly devotion to the nation in addition to domestic roles, it encompassed the basics of what Nazism idealized for women. Due to the restricted nature and the poor quality of women's education, women from this generation of students had fewer degrees than those during the post-war period.<sup>49</sup>

Whereas the Nazi regime introduced various laws to restrict and direct women's education from the elementary level through the university level, their constant backpedaling on these policies during the Second World War in addition to the entire dismantling of these laws following the war demonstrated that the Third Reich was unsuccessful in permanently altering women's roles through education. There are scores of examples of fanatical and Nazified women who strived to meet the Nazi ideal, but the glorified image of the matronly German women was largely fantasy. As Blackburn stated, "the experience after 1945 suggests that the campaign to refashion the character of German womanhood through education died in the ashes of defeat as completely as did the regime's expansionist dreams."<sup>50</sup> While the National Socialist government was unable to transform fundamentally women's roles in society, it was able to mobilize most girls and boys through its recreational youth organizations.

In addition to changes inside the classroom, the Nazis altered the structure of youths' extra-curricular activities in order to further their National Socialist agenda. Nazi doctrine held that a young person's education had to continue outside class time. Dr. Ernst Kreick, a Nazi professor who wrote extensively on the merits of National Socialism in education, believed:

An efficient and logical education can be established not by a reform of methods but by the interplay of all social forces (family, religion, vocation, and State) in the formation of

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<sup>49</sup> Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich*, 106-115; Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 27-28; Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*, 70-75.

<sup>50</sup> Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich*, 114.

an all-round citizen, integrated harmoniously with his right and duties for life has meaning only in a great organic whole.<sup>51</sup>

To realize this goal of creating an interplay of social forces, Nazi reformers dissolved recreational organizations that did not adhere to National Socialist ideals and replaced these groups with their own creations. Just as the Nazis believed boys and girls should have different educations, they created separate youth groups to foster gendered identities. Young boys participated in the Hitler Youth while young ladies were in the League of German Girls.<sup>52</sup> Along with these organizations, the government created programs such as the *Landsjahr* to promote physical fitness and cultivate nationalistic sentiment. These extra-curricular groups and programs coupled with class time were designed to engage nearly all of a young person's time, leaving little opportunity for non-Nazi ideals to be formed at home.<sup>53</sup>

The Nazi regime began the process of dissolving non-government social organizations soon after Hitler's ascension to power. On December 1, 1936, Adolf Hitler formally banned all youth organizations except for those controlled by the state. This law demanded, "All of the German youth in the Reich is organized within the Hitler Youth. The German youth, besides being reared within the family and schools, shall be educated physically, intellectually, and morally in the spirit of National Socialism ... through the Hitler Youth."<sup>54</sup> Considering the size of the organizations, they were sectioned into two categories per group.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Kandel, *The Making of Nazis*, 50.

<sup>52</sup> Shirer, *The Rise*, 252-255; Richard Bessel, *Life in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 22; Kandel, *The Making of Nazis*, 110.

<sup>53</sup> Kandel, *The Making of Nazis*, 81-85.

<sup>54</sup> Shirer, *The Rise*, 253.

<sup>55</sup> Generally, Nazi documentation and academic scholars alike referred to the four youth groups collectively as the Hitler Youth while calling each section by its formal name when distinctions between the groups were necessary. Noakes, *Nazism 1919-1945 Volume 2: State, Economy, and Society 1933-1939*, 222-253.

Within the Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls, there were stages through which a child progressed. Boys were in the German Young People from ages ten to fourteen while girls were in the Youth Girls League. From fourteen to eighteen, boys joined the Hitler Youth and girls became part of the League of German Girls. During their elementary years, children kept performance books in which they tracked their achievements in athletics, camping, and ideology.<sup>56</sup> At the age of fourteen, around their matriculation to junior high, they took tests to determine if they were ready to become part of the formal Hitler Youth organization. If a boy passed the tests, he took the oath to enter the Hitler Youth: “In the presence of this blood banner, which represents our Führer, I swear to devote all my energies and my strength to the savior of our country, Adolf Hitler. I am willing and ready to give up my life for him, so help me God.”<sup>57</sup> Girls took a similar oath to join the League of German Girls.

Such devotional promises to die for the Führer concerned many German parents, but those who did not enroll their children in the youth organizations were punished. The Hitler Youth Law passed on March 25, 1939 made the Hitler Youth compulsory for all Aryan children.<sup>58</sup> Penalties for failure to enroll ten-year-old children included a 150 RM fine and possible imprisonment. Children who skipped the groups’ meetings were subject to police arrest. There were even threats of unenrolled children being sent to orphanages if parents did not force their children to participate. While these laws never compelled every single eligible child to cooperate, the table in Appendix I demonstrated that by the start of the Second World War, nearly eighty-two per cent of children and adolescents were enrolled.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Shirer, *The Rise*, 253.

<sup>57</sup> Shirer, *The Rise*, 253.

<sup>58</sup> Bessel, *Life in the Third Reich*, 28.

<sup>59</sup> Noakes, *Nazism 1919-1945 Volume 2: State, Economy, and Society 1933-1939*, 226-227; Shirer, *The Rise*, 255.

Many parents and teachers, who had matured prior to the Third Reich, disapproved of the lessons perpetuated by the Hitler Youth. They believed these organizations played on generational gaps and children's tendency to question adult authority. Educators likewise believed the Hitler Youth was instilling students with a disdain for intellectualism. Many teachers noticed that Hitler Youth leaders were particularly haughty towards school authority figures. These concerns were published in a 1937 Nazi Teachers' League report:

The extraordinary attitude displayed by the large numbers of our young people to school in general and to intellectual achievement in the grammar schools in particular continually gives the comrades of Branch II cause for justified complaints and for concern for the future. There is widespread lack of any keenness or commitment. Many pupils believe they can simply drift through for eight years and secure their school leaving certificate even with minimal intellectual performance. The schools receive no support whatsoever from the HJ and DJ units; on the contrary, it is those pupils in particular who are in positions of leadership there who often display unmannerly behavior and laziness at school.<sup>60</sup>

Despite some parents' concern over the ideological aspects of these youth organizations, initially the majority of children were enthusiastic about joining recreational groups. In the early years of the Hitler Youth, most activities were sporting and aimed at improving students' physical fitness. Additionally, the consolidation of German youth from all socioeconomic backgrounds across the nation had some beneficial consequences. These children learned the value of physical labor by participating in farm work, and most accounts reflected that participants enjoyed these activities.

For instance, Gustav Köppke was a lower-class boy from the Ruhr region who became a zealous member of the Hitler Youth. Although his father and grandfather were Communists, Köppke became a National-Socialist supporter and joined the war effort at sixteen. Additionally, Gisber Pohl came from a working-poor family. He rose through the ranks of the Hitler Youth and

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<sup>60</sup> Noakes, *Nazism 1919-1945 Volume 2: State, Economy, and Society 1933-1939*, 235.

gained a senior position. This distinction allowed him to volunteer for the *Waffen-SS*. Both Köppke and Pohl saw the Hitler Youth as an avenue to advance their social standings. While these two young men were disillusioned by the fall of the Third Reich, their stories were typical of lower-class people using the Hitler Youth to further their prestige in Nazi Germany. These two young men participated in the same recreational activities as millions of other children in Germany. Underlying the games, farm work, and camping trips, however, were future militaristic goals. When war began in 1939, these activities were altered to become even more paramilitary in nature.<sup>61</sup>

These extra-curricular youth organizations had high levels of enrollment and participation, and there were severe punishments for families who failed to comply with the programs. Despite these attributes, the Hitler Youth was not wholly successful in meeting its political and ideological goals. Furthermore, the quality of leadership varied on a case-by-case basis. Since most qualified men were recruited to work for the government and later in the war effort, leadership roles were given to younger and inexperienced people. Additionally, many middle-class leaders had difficulty connecting with working-class children. As the Second World War progressed, the intensity and scope of the Hitler Youth programs deteriorated.<sup>62</sup>

During the Second World War, administrative resources for the Hitler Youth groups were dwindling and morale within the groups was failing. Illustrating how children in the Hitler Youth viewed the organization during the war, Professor Hanns Mommsen, who was a child during the Third Reich, recalled his unenthusiastic participation in the German Young People and Hitler

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<sup>61</sup> Bessel, *Life in the Third Reich*, 28; Kandel, *The Making of Nazis*, 13, 49-50, 54, 81, 84, 108; Shirer, *The Rise*, 256; Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 110-111; Noakes, *Nazism 1919-1945 Volume 2: State, Economy, and Society 1933-1939*, 233.

<sup>62</sup> Noakes, *Nazism 1919-1945 Volume 2: State, Economy, and Society 1933-1939*, 235.

Youth. He mentioned that the songs that he and his group sang were antisemitic, but since they were in elementary school, they did not understand the significance of the lyrics.<sup>63</sup> Further, he described his advancement into the Hitler Youth. While the ceremony had over 1,200 boys, it was disturbed by the war. He stated, “[sic] In 1944, there was no much chance to indoctrinate people any longer.”<sup>64</sup> Despite these failings, he admitted that the Nazis were able to devour children’s time. He said, “[sic] the Third Reich was successful in preventing the people to have any time and leisure, in order to reflect. If they would have had the possibility, then I think that -- I think the whole thing would be broken down.”<sup>65</sup> Many of these political goals and obstacles were also manifest in the League of German Girls.

The Youth Girls League and the League of German Girls were the female counterparts of the Hitler Youth. Structure and organization mirrored the Hitler Youth, and many activities were similar as well. Some changes, nevertheless, were present. Underscoring the essential difference between the Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls, historian Lisa Pine stated, “for girls ‘motherliness,’ – not femininity – was the ultimate aim, whilst for boys it was very clearly ‘manliness,’ in a militarized sense.”<sup>66</sup> Nazi ideology stressed motherhood for women, so activities such as cultural work, mending, health care, and cooking were important skills that these groups actively practiced. Additionally, girls participated in dance and sport activities, but they were discouraged from using these exercises to express individuality. Many chapters of the League of

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<sup>63</sup> Hans Mommsen, interview by Joan Ringelheim, April 4, 2002, interview RG-50.030\*0407, transcript, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

<sup>64</sup> Mommsen, interview.

<sup>65</sup> Mommsen, interview.

<sup>66</sup> Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 122; Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich*, 107.

German Girls competed annually in sports and dance galas to demonstrate their learned skills and to showcase to the nation the health and vitality of a young generation of women.<sup>67</sup>

Helga Niedrich, an elementary student during the Third Reich, was a member of the Youth Girls League and later the League of German Girls. She recalled her experiences in the youth group as being vital to social acceptance. She said, “You had [to join] because if you didn’t, you were an outcast. They might think you were a Communist. The Hitler Youth was fantastic. I wish they had it here [in the United States].”<sup>68</sup> Frieda Reinhardt, who was also a girl during the Third Reich, had a different experience. She remembered that her mother initially forbade her participation in the Youth Girls League. Despite these protests, however, she secretly joined the club since she felt peer pressure to be involved. Before participation became compulsory, she did not attend meetings regularly. Reinhardt stated that girls who voluntarily participated in the Youth Girls League and League of German Girls had bad reputations in the early years of Hitler’s power.<sup>69</sup> While Neidrich and Reinhardt had different impressions of the Hitler Youth, both noted that it was important to be involved for the sake of social reputation.

These two girls’ memories of the Youth Girls League were common for hundreds of thousands of other German girls during the Third Reich. Outside the Hitler Youth organizations, there were special programs for children. One of the most notable was the *Landsjahr*. This program, restricted primarily to urban children entering junior high school due to budgetary issues, brought German youth from across the nation to work on farms and applied the ideologies fostered

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<sup>67</sup> Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 117-133; Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*, 75-79.

<sup>68</sup> Helga Niedrich, interview by Ina Navazelskis, July 16, 2014, interview RG-50.030.0761, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C., <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn85510>.

<sup>69</sup> Frieda Reinhardt, interview by anonymous, April 25, 2008, interview RG-50.486.0065, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C., <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn517269>.

by the Hitler Youth – national pride, physical fitness, and obedience – to a practical application that aided the nation. The *Landsjahr* helped strengthen children’s physical fitness, allowed them to gain an appreciation for food production, and served the practical purpose of supplying needed labor to understaffed farms. This nine-month-long program placed students on working farms to aid in food production. Along with farm labor, students attended afternoon classes that fostered National Socialist doctrine surrounding collective labor to help the state.<sup>70</sup> The 1941 Nazi textbook *Geschichtsbuch für die Deutsche Jugend* claimed “the student worked beside the manual laborer. Here the young man learns that he is a member of a large *Gemeinschaft*; here he experiences, through the effort of all, a common work coming into being. The strong separate themselves from the weaklings; leadership comes into being.”<sup>71</sup> The *Landsjahr* was only one of many such programs that put Nazi ideology into practice for German youth. Since the *Landsjahr* and many other programs run by the Hitler Youth were popular, and because many children were indoctrinated in these youth organizations to love National Socialism, they had a difficult time accepting the fall of the Third Reich.<sup>72</sup>

By the concluding years of the Second World War, most Hitler Youth members were disenchanted by the collapse of the Third Reich and Hitler’s suicide. Everything they had been taught and had believed vanished.<sup>73</sup> Following Germany’s unconditional surrender, the German educational system was in shambles. Dislocated youth had no access to schools, and those who had achieved social distinctions in the Hitler Youth no longer had any prestige. The conclusion of the war ushered in a period of drastic transition for German youth. Students who had gained a

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<sup>70</sup> Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich*, 124-125; Kandel, *The Making of Nazis*, 81-85.

<sup>71</sup> Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich*, 124.

<sup>72</sup> Bartov, *Hitler’s Army*, 110-111.

<sup>73</sup> Bartov, *Hitler’s Army*, 110-111.



tainted Nazi education had to reconcile the differences between what they learned and what they were now being taught. The post-1945 period was a crucial period for restructuring the German educational system.<sup>74</sup>

One cannot judge the success of Nazi administrative reforms within the classroom independently from the drastic alterations in extra-curricular activities since children's education drew from both fields. Whereas there were intentional obstacles from agents actively working to thwart Nazism as well as unforeseen issues stemming from the massive scale of government intervention, the Nazis were generally successful in altering the educational system to meet their political goals. Following the end of the Second World War, Allied and German efforts to restructure the educational system and to reeducate the German people were largely successful. Some Germans indoctrinated by the Nazi system, especially students who matriculated through their educational careers entirely under National Socialism, had difficulty reconciling their biased views with the ones offered following the war. For this generation of Germans, the inferior quality of their education hindered their career advancements in the post-1945 period.<sup>75</sup> By examining the various educational policies instated in Germany following the Second World War, one can better understand the rigorous process through which Germans had to go to reform their educational system after 1945.

Germany's split into west and east was another complication in the post-1945 period for educational reform. Policies in the West did not necessarily affect the changes made in the Communist east. The ramifications of these differing policies affected several more generations

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<sup>74</sup> Christopher Führ, *The German Education System Since 1945* (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1997), 1-27.

<sup>75</sup> Führ, *The German Education*, 2-3, 13-14.

of Germans through the reunification in 1990. Therefore, it is important to separate the narratives of the West and East when appropriate.<sup>76</sup>

One issue reformers had to face in both West and East Germany was resistance from students and educators, who had been educated under National Socialism. While many pupils and teachers embraced a post-Nazi model, others were reluctant to abandon the system that they had come to know. Although a piece of American (rather than German) popular culture, the 1940s play and film *Tomorrow, the World!* showcased the level of brainwashing German youth experienced during the Third Reich. The plot focused on Emil Bruckner, a young boy who was fervently loyal to the Nazi government, when he moved to the United States to reside with Professor Mike Frame, his uncle. In the small American town, Emil was confronted with inter-faith relationships, racial diversity, and relative social equality. Rather than adhere to these new American ideals, Emil practiced his Nazi tendencies to sow schism in the town, turning children of different races and religions against one another. Ultimately, however, Professor Frame and the community converted the misguided youth to adopt American ideals.<sup>77</sup> *Tomorrow, the World!* was an interesting play and film not only for its commercial success but also for its messages. Although Emil exhibited the racism favored by the Nazis, he was a sympathetic character for American audiences. Since he was a young boy, he was victim of National Socialism rather than a perpetrator.<sup>78</sup>

This piece of American popular culture exemplified the practical issues that German reformers had to face. Notwithstanding these obstacles, reformers created formal policies to reeducate the German citizenry. Karl Geiler, Prime Minister of Hesse following the war,

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<sup>76</sup> Führ, *The German Education*, 4.

<sup>77</sup> Jennifer Fay, *Theaters of Occupation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 1-2.

<sup>78</sup> Fay, *Theaters of Occupation*, 1-21.

recognized the dire need to restructure the educational system. He stated, ““We Germans are faced with an educational task ... We have to introduce an intellectual and psychological reshaping of our people.”<sup>79</sup> Despite initial reforms intended to regain a footing in the first years following the war, political instability and occupational zones made reform difficult. Therefore, most educational reforms began in the 1950s. The 1953 “Outline Plan on Restructuring and Unifying the General State School System” was a vital step towards reestablishing the educational system. This plan created the German Commission for Education and Training, which oversaw the replacement of former Nazi school teachers with new ones. In 1957, the Science Council was created to restructure scientific education in West Germany.<sup>80</sup> Reformers made tremendous strides to recreate the educational system during the first decade following the Second World War, but not all of these changes were as successful as others.<sup>81</sup>

For instance, Hans Mommsen recalled that there was a disruption in his education following the war. Since his family was involved in the Nazi party, his father had to undergo the denazification process. This meant that teachers, who by Nazi law had to be party members, also had to undergo denazification. Consequently, Hans Mommsen along with thousands of other students missed a year of schooling since there were not enough teachers available.<sup>82</sup>

While there were many similarities between educational reform in West and East Germany, the Communist government in East Germany continued the Nazi legacy of using education to promote political ideology.<sup>83</sup> The 1946 “Law on Democratization of the German School” created a new governing structure for the country’s schools that was dedicated to promoting Communist

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<sup>79</sup> Führt, *The German Education*, 8.

<sup>80</sup> Führt, *The German Education*, 15.

<sup>81</sup> Führt, *The German Education*, 16-27.

<sup>82</sup> Mommsen, interview.

<sup>83</sup> Führt, *The German Education*, 2.

objectives. This Communist organization replaced upper-class bodies such as the *Junkers*, who had been instrumental in education before the Third Reich, and banned all private and religious schools. Furthermore in 1949, following several years of denazification, East Germany cut its teachers from 20,000 to 8,000. While necessary to remove teachers engrained with Nazi ideologies, this process left a dearth of qualified faculty members at schools. There was a rush to train 28,000 new teachers to fill these positions. Consequently, the level of training many of these replacements had was rudimentary at best. Additionally, these teachers were taught the Communist model, interpreting Germany's history as a progression through class struggles.<sup>84</sup> In the Stasi state, education played a similar role that it had had during the Third Reich. The Communist government generally replaced Nazi-era organizations and structures with their own versions. For instance, the government replaced the Hitler Youth with the *Freie Deutsche Jugend*, which had similar political aims of indoctrination.<sup>85</sup>

Julia Behrend, a girl during the post-1945 period, came from an academic family. Her father was a teacher and a member of the Communist Party. While her father believed there were flaws in the system, he and Julia thought that the East German system was fairer than the capitalist west. However, Julia recalled that her education had certain political overtones. She noted that schools stressed that history was a work-in-progress towards a Communist goal, that East Germany was in no way responsible for the Holocaust, and that East Germany had a multi-party system.<sup>86</sup> The Behrend family's struggles were only a small part of the educational narrative in the East. Their story, however, was important since it demonstrated that many East Germans were genuinely

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<sup>84</sup> Führ, *The German Education*, 12-13.

<sup>85</sup> Anna Funder, *Stasiland* (London: Granta Publications, 2003), 95; Führ, *The German Education*, 2.

<sup>86</sup> Funder, *Stasiland*, 95-98.

concerned about the quality of education and that the entire system was not merely a vehicle for Communist propaganda.

Ultimately, however, education in East Germany was inferior to the quality available in the west. While there were some marked improvements from the Nazi era, there was still extensive propaganda in classrooms that twisted education to meet political goals. In a fearful society perpetuated by the Stasi, students had little opportunity to express their ideas freely. As a whole, German education did not improve significantly until the 1990 reunification when the single state government gained control over the entire nation's school system.<sup>87</sup>

During the Third Reich, the Nazi government reformed the elementary educational system to promote National Socialism and to foster a love for the Third Reich. While some programs were more successful than others, the government's complete control over both classroom and extra-curricular activities made Nazi ideology pervasive in students' lives. The massive reforms designed to replace teachers with Nazis ensured that students received an education based on racism and nationalism.

Outside the classroom, the Hitler Youth organizations filled students' recreational time and prepared them for later military service. Both the educational changes and the youth organizations indoctrinated millions of German youth, leading many to challenge their parents' authority and anti-Nazi beliefs. Contrarily, some German youth resisted the Nazi ideology that pervaded the school system. Regardless of how people reacted, these various reforms affected every level of the German educational system. The elementary bedrock of education was especially vital to the Nazi educational scheme. Ultimately, these Nazi-era changes did not survive following the demise of the Third Reich since Germany restructured the educational system. In the post-1945 period,

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<sup>87</sup> Führ, *The German Education*, 25-27.

Germany's divided history continued to affect students' education. The more contemporary narrative of a unified Germany has made tremendous strides to improve universal education.

## Appendix I

## MEMBERSHIP FIGURES OF THE HITLER YOUTH

	<i>HJ (boys aged 14-18)</i>	<i>DJ (boys aged 10-14)</i>	<i>BDM (girls aged 14-18)</i>	<i>JM (girls aged 10-14)</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Total population of 10-18 year olds</i>
End 1932	55,365	28,691	19,244	4,656	107,956	
End 1933	568,288	1,130,521	243,750	349,482	2,292,041	7,529,000
End 1934	786,000	1,457,304	471,944	862,317	3,577,565	7,682,000
End 1935	829,361	1,498,209	569,599	1,046,134	3,943,303	8,172,000
End 1936	1,168,734	1,785,424	873,127	1,610,316	5,437,601	8,656,000
End 1937	1,237,078	1,884,883	1,035,804	1,722,190	5,879,955	9,060,000
End 1938	1,663,305	2,064,538	1,448,264	1,855,119	7,031,226	9,109,000
Beg. 1939	1,723,886	2,137,594	1,502,571	1,923,419	7,287,470	8,870,000
and the BDM Werk (girls aged 18-21): 440,189						

ABBREVIATIONS. HJ, Hitler-Jugend (Hitler Youth); DJ, Deutsches Jungvolk (German Young People); BDM, Bund Deutscher Mädel (League of German Girls); JM, Jungmädelsbund (League of Young Girls).

Source: Noakes, *Nazism 1919-1945 Volume 2: State, Economy, and Society 1933-1939*, 227.

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