GERMAN YOUTH IN THE PURGATORY OF NAZI BONDAGE

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This essay discusses the means of bonding and exploitation employed by the National Socialist (Nazi) movement to achieve the extreme ethnic national devotion of young Germans. The discourse includes aspects of youth consciousness prior to, during, and after Hitler's rise to power within political, economic, cultural and ideological frameworks. The results indicate that Nazi influence capitalized on youth perceptions of society during the rapid rise of modernity, the ramifications of the post-WWI political arena, and the subsequent waves of destabilizing economic phenomena. Central to Hitler's control was a systematic employment of manipulation and propaganda. By tapping into and distorting youth psychology, the cult-like power of the Nazis permeated the thoughts and actions of millions of Germans. Disturbing echoes of such mind control are reflected in a contemporary problem whereby unbridled strategies of privileged forces possess unparalleled access and ability to again threaten individual liberty at a grand scale.

In a country with a complex intellectual and political history, youthful dreams of a utopian modernity died in World War One (WWI) and birthed an era of epic tragedy for Germany. What was a relatively newly united and highly productive nation had fractured under the turbulence of defeat and subsequent crises. In a collective trauma, this European culture repudiated Enlightenment ideals of individuality, reason, and equality. Regressively, the populous fell prey to ideals reminiscent of a glorious past and the promise of a utopian future. A freely elected Nationalist Socialist German Workers' Party, the Nazi Party, presented a morphed ideology of cultural tribalism, biology, and economy that consolidated control over

¹H. W. Koch, *The Hitler Youth: Origins and Development 1922-1945* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 2.

²Hans Kohn, "Nationalism," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 331.

the government, the corporate, and the personal in an authoritarian unity.³ While Germany's youth, yearning for renewed identity and purpose, were enveloped in the deceptive danger of the Nazis, the enlightened culture, famous for its poets, philosophers, composers, and scientists devolved into unprecedented brutality.⁴ The command of the Nazi leader, Adolf Hitler, over German youth culture was not just a by-product of an overall domination of Germany, but a purposeful and systematic indoctrination of political, economic, cultural and ideological bonds designed to secure and perpetuate control.

The political perspectives of German youth groups that led up to and followed WWI are salient in relation to the dynamics of Hitler's control. A strong tradition of youth movements in Germany can be traced back to the sixteenth century. Connected through shared language and culture, a concept referred to as *Volksgeist*, in 1801, by German philosopher, Hegel, groups bonded in a melding of the spirit of the individual and the regional culture.⁵ This romantic collective spirit was expressed by movements and in protests amidst the bloody revolutions before unification in 1871.6 As unified Germany became enveloped within the driving engine of modernity, youth movement sentiment irrationally clung to a glorified past and recoiled against vapid materialism and mass industrialization. Alienation towards the burgeoning bourgeois culture compounded with utter disillusionment in the unexpected chaos of the Great War. The perilous outcome triggered alarming unrest. Along with the destruction of war, a chain of uninterrupted political unions, splits, and reunions, disintegrated German stability. Youth insecurity and political discontent amidst the damage and humiliation of the war escalated as the German Weimar democracy flailed.8

Capitalizing on the political chaos, Adolf Hitler designed a campaign that delivered a vague and blurred vision of German unity and wooed and flattered the desperate, receptive, naive, and sentimental youth culture. After a failed attempt to usurp political power by brute force in 1923, Hitler, while imprisoned, premeditated new tactics to gain political control. Outlined in an autobiographical manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, these methods included emotional appeal, propaganda, and the power of

³Leonard Kreiger, "Authority," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 159.

⁴John Passmore, "The Perfectibility of Man," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 475; Koch, 2

⁵Nathan Rotenstreich, "Volksgeist," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, vol. 4 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 492; Koch, 3, 10.

⁶Koch, 15.

⁷Michael H. Kater, *Hitler Youth* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 8-9.

⁸Kohn, 324.

⁹Kater, 1.

speech. Trumpeting a nostalgic vision of Germany restored to a great power, Hitler appealed to youth group sentiment with claims that reassured Germany would again rightfully dominate a confederation of European states. He forcefully echoed the younger generation's distrust of the democratic example set forth by the Weimar Republic. Hitler's Nazi alternative offered a renewed sense of German identity, pride, and respectability that attracted youth membership. Young males born ineligible for WWI conscription (1900-1908) were inculcated with the glory of the war as children and, therefore, particularly malleable to persuasions to join Nazi paramilitary organizations. As the harsh defeat of the war had hungover many youth like dark shadows, Hitler's emotive campaign drove primitive base instincts to become dangerous. The Nazi anti-modernist youth movement became increasingly martial, hierarchal, disciplined, fully uniformed, and racist. While under twenty and too young to vote, these individuals were highly valued as a motivated force on the streets. A 1932 Nazi propaganda leaflet reads:

Fellow youths. We shall overthrow the old system. We are not begging for your votes in the *Reischstag* election, what we want is you. The German revolution begins on the day of the National Socialist seizure of power. Then the young forces from all camps must be united to face the forces of reaction. Our banners do not carry the slogans of 'Moscow' or 'Internationalism' or 'Pacifism.' The only name they carry is that of 'Germany' and nothing but 'Germany.' With your banners flying, come to us, the German Workers 'Youth, fight with us against the old system, against the old order, against the old generation. We are the last fighters for liberty, fight with us for Socialism, for freedom and for bread! Join the German Workers' Youth, Keil. ¹⁶

By 1933, democracy in Germany was lost to the authoritarian grasp of the Nazi regime. By building a political stronghold amongst the young, Hitler aimed to secure a Nazi future.¹⁷

Once in power, the Nazi regime imposed systematic and proliferate political dominance over youth culture across Germany. In Berlin, on the eve of Nazi victory

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¹⁰Thomas Vordermayer, "Tactical Guidelines in Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*," *European State Violence in the Twentieth Century* 91, no. 3 (September 2019): 531; K. J. Leyser et al., "Germany," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 27, 2021. https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany.

¹¹C. W. Guillebaud, "Hitler's New Economic Order for Europe," *The Economic Journal*, 50, no. 200 (1940): 452-453.

¹²Peter N. Stearns, "Protest Movements," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 674.

¹³Andrew Donson, "Why Did German Youth Become Fascists? Nationalist Males Born 1900-1908 in War and Revolution," *Social History* 31, no. 3 (2006): 337.

¹⁴Melita Maschmann, *Account Rendered: A Dossier on My Former Self* (New York: Abelard-Schuman Limited, 1965), 58; Vordermayer, 531.

¹⁵Kater, 9.

¹⁶Koch, 86.

¹⁷Edward J. Kunzer, "The Youth of Nazi Germany," *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 11, no. 6 (1938): 342.

on January 30, 1933, songs, simultaneously aggressive and sentimental, were sung by rows of boys and girls in a ceremonial torchlight procession. Infused with purpose and importance, the younger generations reveled in the revolutionary ethos of Nazism. This spirit of protest resonated with the youth and was reflected in the rapid expansion of the Hitler Youth Group (*Hitlerjugend* or HJ). ¹⁸ Claiming this revolutionary guise, Hitler justified arbitrary legislation with an irreverence to law. ¹⁹ Within the first year of Nazi control, all other youth groups became illegal. Disbandment was enforced by Nazi militia, SA Stormtroopers, who went door to door collecting verboten uniforms. ²⁰ As recruiters and guarantors of Nazi longevity, the HJ disrupted all other loyalties; anyone astray from Nazi convictions presented an endangerment of Germany. ²¹ By 1936, HJ membership became mandatory for minors between ten and seventeen years old. ²² Nazism systematically indoctrinated millions of children born between 1915 and 1934.

The curriculum in school primers mandated Germanic lore, Nazi ideology, and the 'Führer cult.' Nazi classical ideals of stability, order, uniformity, and work ethic imposed body, mind, and spirit to a life independent of personal desire. He regime established emotional conditioning that thwarted rational thought and used coercion, verbal and symbolic, to secure compliance most formatively before the age of thirteen. The initial lure of the Nazi political and cultural agenda had radically shifted to a controlled economical and biological tribal agenda; what was first a love of Germany grew into a hatred of enemy tendencies. School curriculums grew more explicitly racist to include 'blood and soil' propaganda of "racial teachings with scientific trimmings." National domination demanded individual subordination which meant exclusive youth loyalty to Hitler with fanatical national and ideological devotion, from voluntary submission to thought control.

Along with the destabilizing political dynamics, that aided Nazi control, came a history of tumultuous economic crises that intensified the vulnerability of Germany's youth. As a unified Germany advanced with breathtaking speed to

¹⁸Maschmann, 11-12, 44.

¹⁹Felix Gilbert, "Revolution," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, vol. 4 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 164.

²⁰Maschmann, 17, 44.

²¹Kater, 11; Maschmann, 18, 44.

²²United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Indoctrinating Youth," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ indoctrinating-youth.

²³Kater, 12-14.

²⁴Maschmann, 24.

²⁵David Easton and Robert D. Hess, "The Child's Political World," *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, no. 3 (1962) 236-240.

²⁶Kohn, 330; Maschmann, 26.

²⁷Maschmann, 48.

²⁸Krieger, 159-160.

become an industrial power by 1914, urban growth followed national wealth as enthusiastic Germans flocked into city centres at the beginning of WWI.²⁹ In the winter of 1918, sentiment radically shifted to despair as the post-war defeated populations were plagued with food and fuel shortages and a deadly influenza epidemic. Soldiers returned to cities stranded, jobless, hungry, and sullen. Germany, viewed as a pariah, was shackled by a bleak war guilt clause that imposed severe reparations and rooted a universal bitterness. Combined ramifications triggered hyperinflation and, by 1923, the German mark was destroyed. Economic collapse undermined the social fabric of Germany as lifetimes of savings were wiped out.³⁰ The cumulative effects caused a deep spiritual crisis as the results of the failed modern, industrial, capitalist framework caused a deep spiritual crisis that could not be stabilized by neither family nor religion.³¹ Financial enslavement through the terms of the long-term war reparations and erosion by exploitation of capitalism destroyed hope as suicide became a dark feature of Weimar Germany.³² In a void of solutions from authority figures, the youth demographic led an unprecedented suicide rate three times greater than the general public. ³³ Exploiting this spiritual crisis as an entry point to attack the governing system, the Nazi's published victims' names and equated capitalism as "irreconcilable with human life."34

After the economic havoc following WWI, a brief reprieve was followed by another disaster; the economic roller-coaster increasingly taxed a youth demographic that had grown ever more susceptible to false Nazi security. An easing of war reparations and sizeable loans from the US provided Germany relief, however, the market crash of 1929 triggered loan calls and economies fell like dominoes.³⁵ German deflation plunged the nation into another low while joblessness reached a pinnacle in the summer of 1932.³⁶ The situation was particularly perilous for the multitudes of children of war-widowed mothers and fatherless youths who suffered from malnutrition, inadequate shelter, illness, and death. As for fathers who survived, an ongoing failure to provide for their families heightened youth vulnerability.³⁷ Hitler preyed on every instability; projecting himself as an idealized father figure persona, he promised future employment to the German youth. In this

²⁹Leyser et al.

³⁰Levser et al.

³¹Moritz Föllmer, "Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin," *Central European History* 42, no. 2 (2009): 221.

³²Föllmer, 195-201.

³³Kater, 6.

³⁴Föllmer, 203.

³⁵Levser et al.

³⁶George M. Katona, "How Real is the German Recovery?" Foreign Affairs 13, no. 1 (1934): 33.

atmosphere of uncertainty, many of the downtrodden were drawn to the authoritarian protector to allay their fears and anxieties.³⁸

In a political victory secured on the promise of recovery, Hitler infused false confidence to a beleaguered German populous and asserted himself as saviour of the 'Fatherland.' From the ashes of acute financial crisis in 1932, Germany rose in an unprecedented recovery.³⁹ A staggering rebound reduced six million unemployed to two and a half million in less than eighteen months of Nazi leadership. This perception was pivotal to Hitler. Lower unemployment numbers reduced benefits paid out and, coupled by increased marginal tax rates, the fiscal implications facilitated government access to capital including borrowing.⁴⁰ This new debt financed industry, presented a facade of growth, and provided the optics of stability key to a politically content population; the more prosperous the illusion, the easier this became.

While official unemployment reflected radical declines, reality was much more ambiguous. 41 Recategorized as 'substitute employment,' about a million of the unemployed were mandated to perform 'voluntary' labour and received a reduced, meagre stipend. Another 300,000 employed workers, mostly women and youth, were discharged to 'substitute employment' as positions were filled by unemployed males. 42 Receiving lowered benefits and a failure of meaningful opportunity many young workers were worse off in 1938 than after the crash in 1929, and lived in poverty with a stipend that failed to cover basic expenses. 43 Despite this, Hitler presented himself as saviour to Germany, and, as such, he branded youthful 'substitute' workers as 'followers' compelled to loyalty and duty. 44 Nazi 'Strength through Joy' campaigns granted mass tourism entitlements to workers aged fourteen and up in effort to mitigate grim conditions. 45 With scarce opportunity and a perception since childhood of the anarchy of industrial society, many young Germans saw military service as an option that offered security and a sense of nationalistic prestige. 46 As Hitler's spectacular economic recovery projected such intelligence, any inference of ineptness of policy, including aggression, was

³⁸Kater, 6-7.

³⁹Katona, 33; Guillebaud, 453.

⁴⁰Katona, 26-36.

⁴¹Katona, 37-37; Guillebaud, 455.

⁴²Katona, 27-28.

⁴³Otto Nathan, "Consumption in Germany during the Period of Rearmament," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 56, no. 3 (1942): 358; Maschmann, 27.

⁴⁴Spode Hasso, "Fordism, Mass Tourism and the Third Reich: The 'Strength through Joy' Seaside Resort as an Index Fossil," *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 1 (2004): 136.

⁴⁵Nathan, 358.

⁴⁶Koch, 19-20.

dismissed.⁴⁷ While Nazi economics hid a shell game of lies in an exploitive system, Hitler galvanized youth dedication to Nazi authority.⁴⁸

Just as political and economic conditions were catalysts to authoritarian control, Nazi ideology captured the historical heartbeat of youth culture. Modernity's myth of liberty floundered in the reality of industrialized society as Germany's youth was not freed, but chained to a dehumanizing machine of capitalism. Mass ills confounded urbanity and lent to growing anxiety. Family functioned in alignment with the drone of society; as parents achieved, so the young followed in the same narrow path in a patriarchal authority that commanded perpetual conformism. Politics became bureaucratic and irrelevant and art was insipid.⁴⁹ As the Enlightenment's secularism had widened with each generation, society reflected a lack of religious cohesion. 50 Once a template of moral and ethical grounding, the deeper meaning of Christianity became a rote tradition as an authoritarian and unimaginative canon turned any natural receptiveness towards religion into the opposite.⁵¹ Education composed of pedantic study failed to inspire. The working classes began a mundane factory life at fourteen while middle class youth, oppressed by the progress of modernity's repetition and keen to explore new ideas, congregated in youth group movements. Romantic notions of war, led to devastation; WWI slaughtered the once hawkish youth group members in a modern assembly line of death.⁵² Disillusionment left them ripe for the dogma of Nazi ideologies. Idealizing a break from intergenerational conflict and modernity's failed democratic capitalism, Hitler, disguised in patriarchal appeal as an "omniscient and omnipotent father," presented a model of society in a blurred resemblance to archaic values.⁵³ Here, youth culture became spiritually captive within 'the state,' the measure of all things. Escaping one paradigm, the young embraced the menacing danger of another; this one hidden under a facade of honour, admiration, and above all the love of the 'Fatherland.'54

By exploiting ideological and cultural discontents of a disillusioned population, Hitler, as Führer, used his authority to control and mold the German youth in the false promise of a 'chosen' race. Propaganda flooded every village and emphasized Hitler's speeches, the re-creation of a German empire, and special subjects regarding 'racial science.' 55 Hitler reframed the cultural meaning of *Volksgeist* to

⁴⁷Maschmann, 59.

⁴⁸Hasso, 141.

⁴⁹Koch, 19-23.

⁵⁰Herbert Butterfield, "Christianity in History," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973): 407.

⁵¹Koch, 23; Maschmann, 24.

⁵²Koch, 2, 24.

⁵³Kater, 4-10.

⁵⁴Koch, 16-23; Maschmann, 73.

⁵⁵Nathan, 381-382; Guillebaud, 452; Maschmann, 51.

validate an ideology of a pure Aryan race determined by an organic or ancestral past that was unalterable into the future. By 1939, over 765,000 young people served in leadership roles in Nazi organizations heavily concentrated in the military and special forces. Bred for service to Germany, they were instructed, drilled, and trained with hard, tough, and swift efficiency. This culture, subjugated by convention outside of family, had mobility, protection, and arrogant empowerment driven by a merciless ideology of the survival of the fittest. Oaths of fealty to Adolf Hitler were reciprocated in the granting of authority to the HJ, who, with autonomy from parents and without culpability under law, possessed an incomparable sense of superiority over average German citizens of any age, even when they were Nazis, and nearly absolute power over those who were not. Brainwashed to think, act, and fight with self-sacrifice and absolute obedience to Hitler until death, boys as young as their early teens were slaughtered in the last desperate months of 1945. The lessons of a demagogue in biological racism and superiority led them to carnage.

Drawing on political, economic, cultural and ideological cues, the Führer, with absolute authority, systematically misinformed, misguided, and misused Germany's vulnerable youth population. Manipulating a group with a shared sense of identity, Hitler conformed young minds to Nazi control. Utilizing advantages including those born out of the ramifications of the aftermath of WWI, a series of economic crises, and a government ill-equipped to face the challenges of capitalism under duress, Hitler persuaded a democratic populous to embrace his authoritarian regime. Once in power, the Nazis ruled over the youth population indoctrinating various belief systems within school curriculums while mandating rigid youth group training. Hitler capitalized on an authoritarian control over the economy achieved by manipulation in its structuring and related propaganda. Economic uncertainty was sustained with underemployment. This presented an appeal to join the military as not only a viable economic security, but also, a recognizable transition from the rigorous training that had already been imposed in the formation of mandatory youth groups; this scheme provided a systematic conduit for many to the path of military recruitment. With an ingrained nationalistic hierarchy that replaced family and faith as beacons of authority, the Nazi regime provided a sense of power to the youth population. By alluding to a centuries-old sentiment in the connection of a shared language and culture, imposed propaganda gradually morphed the romantic philosophy into a belief of racial superiority rooted in the guise of science. By cultivating a sense of shared pride of heritage, Hitler drove

⁵⁶Kohn, 327.

⁵⁷United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

⁵⁸Maschmann, 26.

⁵⁹Koch, 26; Kater, 3-10.

⁶⁰Kater, 1-4.

⁶¹Koch, 2; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

⁶²Kater, 2.

youth loyalty and systematically indoctrinated a sense of German destiny. His appeal was designed to alleviate a historically ambitious and accomplished citizenry desperate for relief having been deeply injured by the shame of failure. By controlling information and perpetuating propaganda, Hitler gained control over a large populous to ultimately destroy tens of millions of lives. As a cautionary tale, a reconstitution of this twentieth century debacle pivots around the misuse of information. Contemporary instances include disinformation directed towards latent thought control. This seemingly perennial problem of abuse of power is juxtaposed to democracy as a genuinely informed population is the basis of a free state. A broken information ecosystem, past or present, is a serious problem at the base of all others.

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