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Elizabeth Fox

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REBUILDING GERMANY'S CHILDREN: THE NAZI INDOCTRINATION AND POSTWAR REEDUCATION OF THE HITLER YOUTH

Elizabeth Fox

Introduction

On May 8, 1945, as the Allies advanced deep into German territory, the Third Reich disintegrated. In the aftermath of World War II, the horrors of the Nazi dictatorship were fully exposed when the Nazi political foundations finally crumbled, reflecting the wreckage of most German cities, such as Berlin. German civilians were left to rebuild their country, their lives, and the German psyche. As they looked upon the debris of their homes and towns, the Germans were traumatized, lost, and helpless; the once proud and mighty Nazi national identity was shattered. As a result, they turned to the German youth population to shoulder the great burdens of reconstruction, the majority of whom had participated in the Hitler Youth and were also psychologically devastated and lost. Günter Grass, former Hitler Youth member of the *10th SS Panzer Division Frundsberg*, once reflected on having been in the Hitler Youth generation of Germany, noting that he felt “too young to have been a Nazi, but old enough to have been formed by the Nazi regime.”¹ Despite having been formerly molded and shaped by Nazi indoctrination, Germany’s youth became the best hope for

¹ Quoted in Jan-Werner Müller, *Another Country: German Intellectuals, Unification and National Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 10.

the future and, through reeducation and democratization, the means through which Nazi principles could be extricated from the German consciousness. In the author's opinion, the accounts of former Hitler Youth members and other German adolescents do, in fact, attest to the shift towards democratization. One of the postwar tasks at hand was the reconstruction of the German ideology, especially that of the youth, to enable this formerly proud people to come to terms with events during the war and how best to move forward. The rebuilding of Germany's children was the daunting mission facing the Allies and German citizens.

This essay will examine the success or failure of democratization in Germany after World War II through an examination of postwar memoirs of former Hitler Youth members, as well as an oral history interview with a former member, Erich Neumeier [Fig. 1]. It explores whether or not those who looked back on their participation in the Hitler Youth continued to base their lives on the Nazi ideals with which they had been indoctrinated or if their reeducation during the rebuilding of Germany after World War II was a success. While the brainwashing of German adolescents was accomplished through the regime's schooling, physical training, and Fascist pageantry of the Hitler Youth organization, this essay will argue that the ultimate disintegration of Germany at the end of the war and in the postwar period, combined with the Allied efforts at postwar reeducation and democratization, successfully influenced a shift away from Nazi ideals; the formerly indoctrinated youth were the first to be influenced. In the wake of the indisputable failure and disillusionment of the Germans, Nazi principles simply could not withstand the impending wave of democracy that began to affect postwar Germany.

Notes on the Evidence

In order to discuss contextually the Hitler Youth and the Allied postwar reeducation in Germany, one must describe the methodology undergirding the evidence used in this essay. The

APRIL 6 1)
2016

- 1 ERICH NEUMEIER
- 2 7-7-1927 JINGOLSTADT GERMANY
- 3 FATHER WORKED FOR A DEFENCE CO AS AN OFFICE WORKER, MY MOTHER WAS A HOUSE KEEPER. I HAD A 2 YEAR OLDER BROTHER
- 4 JINGOLSTADT GERMANY - 60 MILES NORTH OF MUNICH, ON THE DANUBE RIVER.
- 5 HAPPY CHILDHOOD, PLAYING SOCCER, SWIMMING IN THE DANUBE, EXPLORING THE NEIGHBORHOOD PARK
- 6 YOUNG VOLK 10 YEARS, HITLER YOUTH 14 YEARS. APPROXIMATELY 95% JOINED BOTH ORGANIZATIONS. WHEN YOU WANTED TO BELONG YOU JOINED.
- 7 NO RANG, JUST A MEMBER.
- 8 IN YOUNG VOLK WE HAD A WEEKLY MEETING, HAD SPORT - (RUNNING, JUMPING) AN BUILDING MODER GLIDER AIR PLANES, (I WOULD SAY SIMILAR TO THE BOY SCOUTS)

Figure 1. Portion of Erich Neumeier Interview, page 1. Conducted on April 6, 2016.

majority of primary and secondary sources provide comprehensive histories on how both the processes of Nazi indoctrination and Allied postwar reeducation policies shaped the ideologies of German youths. However, various historical accounts have placed little emphasis on critically evaluating the postwar memories of former Nazi youths. Debates on whether democra-

tization was extremely successful have occurred amongst historians. When discussing studies made by German scholars such as James Tent decades after the postwar period, historian Jaimey Fisher claims they did not grasp the impact of reeducation in its cultural and social context; instead “these studies generally focus on (re)educational policy and neglect the wider public sphere debates about generation and ‘the German youth’ as well as their consequences for German culture and national identity more generally.”² Konrad Jarausch also agrees with Fisher that postwar discussion and analysis have in the past focused on the history rather than addressing the question of democratization. He argues that the problematic aspects of the entire process were largely ignored by Whig history, which emphasized the optimistic long-term success (albeit a significant aspect of democratization) rather than perspectives of the process at the time.³ With respect to the views of these historians, attempts will be made to trace what democratization meant to German youths by analyzing the memories and perceptions of former Hitler Youth members.

The methodology in this essay places primary importance upon tracing the postwar memory of German youths and creating a thoughtful analysis of their narratives. The problem underlying most of these postwar memories, mainly those of Erich Neumeier, is their silence concerning their participation in furthering the Nazi cause as Hitler Youth members, as well as their roles and thoughts during the democratization process that transformed post-1945 Germany. For instance, in my interviews with Neumeier, not once did he comment on Hitler, anti-Semitism, or the treatment of the Jews. Former Hitler Youth members such as Neumeier, Alfons Heck, and Günter

² Jaimey Fisher, *Disciplining Germany: Youth, Reeducation, and Reconstruction After the Second World War* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 15.

³ Konrad H. Jarausch, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945-1995*, trans. Brandon Hunziker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 131.

Grass indicate that they viewed their experience in the youth organizations as times of social fellowship, rather than Nazi indoctrination; this leads to the question, in Neumeier's case at least, whether or not his silence is possibly still a remnant of postwar guilt, shame, and denial manifesting itself. A number of sociological studies have deeply analyzed the problem of silence that afflicted postwar Germany regarding Nazi atrocities. In the article "Towards a Science of Silence: The Consequences of Leaving a Memory Unsaid," this type of postwar silence is termed by sociologists as mnemonic silence, meaning "the absence of expressing a memory," whether intentional or unintentional, overt or covert.⁴ It shows that silence sometimes does not mean actual forgetting but the act of trying to forget. The article categorizes this silence as "refusing to remember overtly while remembering covertly"; and it is perhaps done by Neumeier as he is justifying his Hitler Youth experience and innocence as a young naïve man who never got to fully participate in democratization due to his move to America. In this category, deception can be involved, but the motivations in refusing to remember can occur because "speakers are tuning what they say to the perceived attitudes or expectations of their audience, articulating some aspects of their memory while leaving others unmentioned."⁵ The article also mentions the *rebound effect*, in which intentional silences may not elicit greater forgetting, but ironically "can actually make speakers more likely to remember the suppressed material in the future

⁴ Charles B. Stone, et al., "Towards a Science of Silence: The Consequences of Leaving a Memory Unsaid," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 7, no. 1 (2012): 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 41. While I do not doubt Neumeier gave a true account of his life in the Hitler Youth based on what he experienced and perceived as a young boy (since he was not mature enough to realize the consequences of his participation), it is possible that he failed to acknowledge or willingly admit how he felt about Nazi indoctrination in the Hitler Youth after decades of realizing the extent of Nazi atrocities.

rather than to forget it.”⁶ This explains how postwar accounts like those of Alfons Heck and Günter Grass are created and analyzed years after the postwar period, the time when they remained silent in order to focus on finding stability in post-WWII Germany. Sociologists Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger similarly argue that “the passage of time may in itself increase the probability of finding [overt] silence as witnesses pass away or grow old, and collectives grow bored or tired.”⁷ Silence according to them is a coping mechanism for acknowledging and remembering the past. Thus, former Nazi German youths have recently sought to recollect and write down their postwar experiences years later, as a way of at least claiming some responsibility for their actions—“keeping completely silent about certain issues is increasingly becoming a non-option for many nations [i.e. Germany].”⁸ Overall, these sources, including the new interview, further this essay’s analysis of how postwar memory is analyzed in terms of the history of the Hitler Youth and the democratization process in post-1945 Germany.

Hitler Youth Background and Indoctrination

In 1926, Nazi politician Kurt Gruber successfully re-vamped Hitler’s official youth organization led by Baldur von Shirach, giving it the title *Hitlerjugend*. The activities and involvement of the Hitler Youth can be summarized in three main goals: “to mobilize and to discipline an entire generation of German youth in the spirit of National Socialism; to loosen

⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁷ Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Chana Teeger, “Unpacking the Unspoken: Silence in Collective Memory and Forgetting,” *Social Forces* 88, no. 3 (March 2010): 1110.

⁸ Ibid., 1104.

their ties to the Church, the family, and the past; to inculcate the ideal that the State was everything and the individual nothing.”⁹

The Hitler Youth can be described as a social organization with activities that required physical fitness and military instruction. This obligation involved participation in athletic games, which indirectly introduced youth to actual military operations and strategies. In an oral interview conducted by this author, Erich Neumeier, a former member of both the *Jungvolk* and the *Hitlerjugend*, stated that he remembered participating in sports activities as well as constructing and flying gliders. In his written description, he compares his time in both organizations, which he claimed were similar to the Boy Scouts¹⁰:

I was in the young volk at 10 years, Hitler Youth at 14 years. Nearly 95% joined both organizations. When you wanted to belong, you joined. I did not have a rank. I was just a member. In young volk, we had weekly meeting, had sport [running, jumping] and building moder [model] glider airplanes. . . . I did not feel that I was weaned from my family.

I joined the “pilot” Hitler Youth section. My fondest memory were learn how to fly a glider. . . . I liked to fly tremendously. There were other sections of Hitler Youth; . . . you were free to choose your group after changing from young volk to Hitler Youth at 14 years.¹¹

⁹ Craig W.H. Luther, *Blood and Honor: The History of the 12th SS Panzer Division, “Hitler Youth,” 1943-1945* (San Jose: R. James Bender Publishing, 1987), 13.

¹⁰ Erich Neumeier, interviewed by Elizabeth Fox, April 6, 2016, 1. Neumeier was born in 1927 in Ingolstadt, Germany just outside of Munich on the Danube River. This interview represents a credible account of his experiences in and perceptions of the Hitler Youth before and during the war, as well as his perception of the postwar reconstruction, democratization, and reeducation process. Neumeier is a friend of Elizabeth’s grandfather.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

In essence, the *Hitlerjugend* became an important organization that indirectly trained these young men into becoming Nazi soldiers and fighting machines. The Nazi *Schutzstaffel* (Elite Guard or SS) was primarily responsible for supporting and recruiting young boys from the Hitler Youth, serving as a connection for members, and, in fact, manipulating them to enter into SS positions. The SS “fed its insatiable thirst for power and its penetration into the collective mind and social fabric by replenishing its personnel from the politically conditioned HJ [*Hitlerjugend*].”¹²

The Hitler Youth’s education on Nazi principles became the quintessential foundation of the organization that shaped the activities and training of its members. In addition to teaching about the race and ideologies of enemies, such as Jews and Communists, instruction emphasized German history (from its modern history in 1871 up to the humiliating end of World War I) and the life of Hitler. Their most important handbook, which gave an overview of those Nazi principles, was entitled *The Nazi Primer*; in it, the goals of the Hitler Youth (“character building, physical training, and training in the National Socialist worldview”) clearly echoed the ideals emphasized by Nazi leadership.¹³ The *Primer* outlined complex ideas pertaining to German population and culture that are ultra-nationalist in attitude. For instance, the *Primer* emphasized the need for racial purification in the German community, which was presently in danger of creating impure variations in races (or “hybrids”)—therefore, “a Jew who, during the ‘System Time,’ has assumed a German name and adopted the Christian belief is and remains a Jew.”¹⁴ In this way, it advocated for the preserva-

¹² Gerhard Rempel, *Hitler’s Children: The Hitler Youth and the SS* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 257.

¹³ Harwood L. Childs (trans.), William E. Dodd (comm.), *The Nazi Primer: Official Handbook for Schooling the Hitler Youth* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1938), xix.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13. “System time” refers to the period of the Weimar Republic between 1918 and 1933.

tion of the Aryan race, the most perfect civilization in the world, from mixed, abnormal peoples like the Jews, who seek to corrupt them and the natural order of the universe. This racial concept was a hidden rejection of democracy that instead upheld National Socialism as a suitable ideology in creating the pure, rather than individualistic, German state. William E. Dodd, the former U.S. ambassador to Germany from 1933-1937, effectively summarized the overall significance of this indoctrination as “preparing the way for a Nazified world where all freedom of the individual, of education, and of the churches is to be totally suppressed.”¹⁵

These Nazi ideals were espoused by the German youth who separated themselves from their traditionally conservative moral guides—namely the church, school, and family unit. Thus, the Hitler Youth became a modern organization that appealed to independent young minds, as autonomy was granted to them as well as the “opportunity for young people to be respected and responsible.”¹⁶ For example, parental consent was not required to join the SS Panzer Division or the Hitler Youth. Additionally, membership into these organizations eventually became mandatory, breaching the voice of parental authority and replacing it with that of the State in the guise of youthful rights of independence. This sparked an intergenerational conflict, specifically between the older generation of the Weimar Republic and the new, young generation of Nazis. A former enthusiastic member of the *Hitlerjugend*, Alfons Heck, was driven to the Hitler Youth organization as a ten-year-old due to his “crav[ing] for action” and for freedom from responsibilities.¹⁷ Similarly, devoted *Jungvolk* member Eberhard

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 280.

¹⁶ Michael H. Kater, *Hitler Youth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1.

¹⁷ Alfons Heck, *A Child of Hitler: Germany in the Days When God Wore a Swastika* (Phoenix: Renaissance House Publishers, 1985), 9.

Weinbrenner learned from his teacher that “by resisting his parents he exhibited true *Heldenmut* [heroic courage].”¹⁸

The Hitler Youth also promoted itself as an organization of opportunity for all those of different backgrounds. The organization’s members were rewarded based on merit rather than social standing. In their immaturity, selfishness, and ignorance, these young boys sought power and strength over other children as they attempted to climb the ranks in their organization and be rewarded for their military and athletic prowess. In spite of this desire for Nazi power and leadership, the majority of the Hitler Youth, primarily its youngest members, were attracted to join the organization for the camaraderie and Fascist pageantry, normalizing the organization and its purpose. During his time in the Hitler Youth, Günter Grass reveled in this youthful fellowship without question: “The wishful thought of [the Hitler Youth] slogan, *Youth Must Be Led by Youth!* was backed by promises of overnight hikes and other outdoor activities in the woods along the beach.”¹⁹ Erich Neumeier claimed that he had “a happy childhood, playing sooccer [sic], swimming in the Danube, exploring the neighborhood park. . . . As a young boy, I heard from my father, actually just good news. My father had work, our family had more than enough to eat. Germany was rising industrulic [sic]. I would say [I was] happy and proud to be a glider training pilot [in the Hitler Youth].”²⁰ Neumeier further expressed his disinterest in Nazi politics during his times in the *Jungvolk* and Hitler Youth, commenting on the fact that he never discovered the negative aspects of Nazism (i.e.

¹⁸ Frederic C. Tubach, *German Voices: Memories of Life During Hitler’s Third Reich* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 106. Weinbrenner had frequently rebelled from his Protestant parents, who were opposed to National Socialism, another example of intergenerational conflict.

¹⁹ Günter Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (Orlando: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc., 2007), 20.

²⁰ Neumeier, “Interview,” 2.

anti-Semitism).²¹ To most German youths, their required duty as German citizens was to participate in the Hitler Youth—there was no scrutiny of their actions since they did not understand the hidden political implications of the Nazism they naively practiced. In essence, as Alfons Heck reflected, “Children are too immature to question the veracity of what they are taught by their educators.”²² Like many of his peers, Neumeier did not fully realize the implications of his actions, but was just happy to be a child who “belonged” in a social organization. This illustrates the brilliance of the Nazi establishment in indoctrinating youth.

Other postwar accounts reveal the realistic tensions of participation in the organization. Ilse Koehn, a former member of the German Girl’s League, *Jungmaedel*, faced hardships in her organization, providing a different story regarding her involvement as a half-Jewish girl in the Hitler Youth. Koehn’s identity as a *Mischling* (mixed-blood) was a hidden but common situation amongst other former members. In a classified document titled “Expulsion of A Mischlinge from the Hitler Youth” from the Archives of the Wiener Library in London, correspondence and orders from the Chief of the NDSAP Personnel Office detail the investigation into whether or not the two sons of Hildegard Becker should continue membership in the Hitler Youth when it was discovered while undergoing divorce proceedings that Becker’s mother had a Jewish identity.²³ In spite of Becker’s declaration that she was only half-Jewish and that she “obviously tried hard to prevent expulsion of her sons,” the NDSAP officials rejected the boys’

²¹ Ibid.

²² Heck, *Child of Hitler*, 3.

²³ “Expulsion of a Mischlinge From The Hitler Youth. The 'Final Solution' (September 1939-May 1945): 'Mischlinge', Mixed Marriages, Non-Aryans, Racial Disgrace. Eyewitness Accounts.” July 1938 to January 1939. Archives of the Wiener Library, London. The Wiener Library, London, United Kingdom. *Archives Unbound*. Web. 15 Mar. 2016.

continued membership in the Hitler Youth, “even if they were only 1/8 part Jewish.”²⁴ The situation with Becker and her sons reflects the danger of being discovered, even with the smallest remnants of Jewish ancestry. Such threat of discovery could affect the most loyal Hitler Youth members, as seen in the fear of Ilse Koehn and her family. Koehn joined the *Jungmaedel* because her friends had told her “how much fun they had, singing and playing all kinds of games”; the real function of these activities, however, was to instruct these girls on Nazi philosophy.²⁵ In one harsh situation, Koehn was forced along with thousands of Berlin children to evacuate to East Prussia, when in fact they were sent to Czechoslovakia without the knowledge of their families; there, Hitler Youth dignitaries, including Baldur von Schirach, welcomed them.²⁶ These girls were told to lie in their letters to their parents that they were safely secure in their area when in actuality they lived in cruel, strict, and unfair conditions. This situation focused on forming the German boys and girls into effective Nazi leaders who should follow orders regardless of the circumstances.

Overall, while the Hitler Youth organizations had success in the indoctrination of the youth toward Nazism, it was later discovered that there were hidden tensions that were revealed in the aftermath of the war. Many children were affected by the cruel, unjust exploitation of the Hitler Youth organization. As Gerhard Rempel remarks, members of the Hitler Youth were “a generation of misguided idealists. Hitler’s children demonstrated a youthful capacity for fidelity. That loyalty was abused.”²⁷ The transformative experiences and continuous blind loyalty of the Hitler Youth members to the Third Reich was put to the test when democratization took control of Germany in the postwar period.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ilse Koehn, *Mischling, Second Degree: My Childhood in Germany* (New York: Greenwillow Books, 1977), 8.

²⁶ Ibid., 47.

²⁷ Rempel, *Hitler’s Children*, 262.

Stages of Reeducation: Demilitarization, Denazification, Democratization

The collapse of Nazi Germany in 1945 abruptly ended Nazi indoctrination. In an attempt to salvage the remnants of German society and reduce the long-term trauma felt by the German population, the Allies implemented stages for what they hoped would be successful reeducation leading to democratization. The Allies targeted the youth as the bulwark upon which Western Germany (also the subsequent new Bonn Republic) could reconstruct and once again be successfully integrated into Western society. The phase of demilitarization divided Germany into zones controlled by the United States, Great Britain, France, and Russia. Under foreign Allied occupation, Germany was required to eliminate Nazi military organizations like the *Wehrmacht*, *Waffen-SS*, and *Volkssturm* militia. German soldiers willingly underwent this demilitarization process for “fear of being captured, especially by the Russians, as well as the urge to make their way home unrecognized.”²⁸ This act of capitulation largely contrasted with the Nazi militant values and mindset of the Hitler Youth, marking the first turn for many from militarization to civility.

Denazification became an essential phase in eradicating Nazi organizations and culture that contained elements of Fascism. In October 1945, the Allied Control Council issued its eighth law providing legal ramifications for denazification measures. These measures effectively “dissolved the N.D.S.A.P., its formations, and its affiliated organizations, of which some sixty-two were enumerated, making it illegal to revive the Party, either under its old name or a new one, and providing for the confiscation of the Party’s assets, property,

²⁸ Jarausch, *After Hitler*, 23. The Germans also desired to have a normal and peaceful civilian life when leaving the frontlines, which made disarmament and demobilization easier.

files and documents.”²⁹ Additionally, German businesses and industries were “prohibited from employing former Party Members in any but the lowest positions,” in order to remove former members from professional society and reduce their influence.³⁰ Censorship was also placed on Nazi films, newspapers, and other media, gradually becoming replaced by its American alternatives, such as the newspaper *Die Neue Zeitung*. One specific Allied attempt of censorship occurred in German cinema, in which a 1951 film titled *Die Sünderin* (*The Sinner*) in 1951 told the story of a woman who resorts to prostitution and later commits suicide.³¹ The film provoked uproar in the Protestant and Catholic churches that protested against the film’s immoral themes. Through such critical involvement, the church, once a traditional enemy of the Hitler Youth, became an institutional authority whose mission was to help rebuild postwar Germany based on conservative values. As a result, “by the beginning of the Bonn Republic, these well-entrenched interests dominated the process of social and cultural reconstruction.”³²

Although the majority of Nazi control was effectively eliminated, historian Konrad Jarausch argues that denazification was largely unsuccessful in the short term. Denazification boards failed to eradicate most former Nazis from professional life, which, to be sure, was a difficult and impractical goal to attain in the short term; they also failed to convince them of

²⁹ “Europe 1945: Number 2: Germany Under Allied Occupation (As Mirrored In The German Press). Wiener Library Publications,” October to December 1945 (Archives of the Wiener Library, London, The Wiener Library, London, United Kingdom), *Archives Unbound*, 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Heidi Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany: Reconstructing National Identity After Hitler* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 92.

³² *Ibid.*, 93.

their collective responsibility in the Holocaust.³³ The bureaucratic process of removing ardent Nazis from officer positions and finding new appropriate officers was slow and unpopular amongst the German masses. One mayor in Hamburg claimed that removing former Nazi and SS members would lead to a “class of disgruntled and sacked ex-Party members” that would be “dangerous, ill-advised and a threat to law and order”; he also rejected “employment of proven anti-Fascists and former concentration camp inmates as contrary to the best interests of democratic administration.”³⁴ In spite of such claims and initial backlash, local governments, primarily in West Germany, underwent tremendous efforts to purge Nazis from society and carry out their own programs of denazification. The denazification processes differed with regards to Soviet-controlled areas versus those of the Western Allies—the Soviets using their own brand of indoctrination and brutality—but such processes were underway in all areas of Germany.

Democratization benefited from the reeducation of the postwar German youth, primarily through the reorganization of the schools. Upon their reopening, schools faced problems such as the lack of textbooks approved to replace those that emphasized Nazi propaganda, like *The Nazi Primer*. In addition, when observing literacy and general knowledge, it became apparent that the German children lacked the proper education due to the former emphasis placed on Nazi indoctrination rather than on core teachings. Further, democratization required qualified teachers who were not former Nazi Party members:

In view of the great political responsibility towards the German youth and future, the prospective teachers are required—and this point is expressively stressed by the TÄGLICHE RUNDSCHAU, the paper of the Soviet command—to belong to those classes of the German masses that are known for their democratic traditions

³³ Jaraus, *After Hitler*, 54.

³⁴ “Europe 1945: Number 2,” 5.

and leanings, namely the workers, the peasants and the working intelligentsia.³⁵

The brutal stages of demilitarization, denazification, and democratization reflect the long, arduous process of reconstructing Germany to overcome the brainwashing and indoctrination employed by the Nazi Regime in their attempt to control all aspects of German society.

Responses to Reeducation: Tracing Postwar Memory

The main problem in analyzing postwar memory is the silence of many Germans during the democratization process extending into the 1950s and 1960s. Author Joachim Fest admitted that he would not have immediately put pen to paper, writing his precise early memories, if he had not had a radio commission to author his account of German history.³⁶ In collectively working through his experiences, Fest termed the post-1945 period as “The Great Denial,” in which the “early years after the war was later described as a ‘communicative silence.’”³⁷ This silence was formed not because of repression by the Allied forces but because of Germany’s determination to forget the horrors of their recent past. According to Tubach, “For mere physical and psychological survival, it was necessary for us to look forward; to look back meant facing a wall too high and formidable to be scaled.”³⁸

Following World War II, German youths, especially older Hitler Youth members born before 1930, had become disoriented by the reality of National Socialism and its subsequent destruction of Germany. Amidst the rubble and dilapidated towns of Germany, they felt lost without the Nazi authoritarian

³⁵ “Europe 1945: Number 2,” 29.

³⁶ Joachim C. Fest, *Not Me: Memoirs of a German Childhood*, trans. Martin Chalmers (London: Atlantic Books Ltd., 2012), 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 354.

³⁸ Tubach, *German Voices*, 100-101.

ideology in which they were raised. Therefore, when the occupied German state was in the beginning stages of its democratic transformation, German youths actually protested against democratization. Initially, many of these adolescents remained loyal to the Führer and to National Socialism, believing that democracy would fail like it had with the Weimar Republic. Their resistance is evidence that actions in denazification were ineffectively carried out in the beginning of the postwar period. Having been traumatized by the war, these youths clung to the ideals of Nazism, unwilling to admit their defeat. The indoctrinated youths continued to claim in the summer of 1945, “Hitler was a great man who insisted that ‘[Germans] have not really lost the war.’”³⁹

Proud, nationalistic German youths sought to fight against Allied control. They believed the American occupiers threatened to change the traditional social and political structures of German society and replace them with Americanized versions. Fisher states that there was contention between the Germans and Americans over Allied educational reforms that Germans believed would intrude upon other societal aspects of the German identity. Drawing upon the American “Zook” Report, Fisher explains that Germans strongly protested proposed changes in the structure of German schools based on the American democratic model; this revealed “how youth and education afforded postwar Germans one last front on which to fight the Allies and on which to stake their identities.”⁴⁰ The youthful resentment against this Allied control is also reflected by surveys in the U.S. zone. The majority of Germans opposed denazification “in practice, most often because they felt that too many ‘small fish’ were being netted while the bigger ones were getting away.”⁴¹ Germans claimed that these democratic

³⁹ Jaraus, *After Hitler*, 31.

⁴⁰ Fisher, *Disciplining Germany*, 72.

⁴¹ Steven P. Remy, *The Heidelberg Myth: The Nazification and Denazification of a German University* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 151.

policies carried out by the occupiers were ignorant of the realities of postwar life in Germany. In response to interview questions, Erich Neumeier stated that he believed the Marshall Plan, an American initiative that aided to help rebuild postwar Western Europe, had good intentions but was poorly organized and lacked understanding of the German people, customs, and beliefs. This was evidenced in the corn that was sent as a food ration to the starving German people—however, “in Germany corn is strictly food for picks [pigs]. So in Germany, Bavarian people thought the Americans think of us as [pigs].”⁴² Despite their need for such aid, the majority of German youth were attempting to retain their sense of nationalistic pride for their country, even in ruins, unwilling to lose their dignity in the face of such calamity.

Although the former Nazi youth initially protested against democratization procedures, they also felt betrayed by Hitler and the Third Reich. While in the organization, Hitler Youth members became inspired by the German nationalist pride presented in their ritualistic activities and elaborate spectacles celebrating Nazism and Hitler’s leadership. Hitler became the archetype of National Socialism whom all the young boys and girls placed on a pedestal—as a father figure, he mattered more than Nazi ideology.⁴³ Upon swearing their oath of fealty to the Führer in a ceremonial fashion, the members cast Hitler in a magical charismatic aura and thereby were inspired by his majesty; this is just one example of the effect of Nazi pageantry employed by the organization. Heck discusses an event where Hitler gave his speech to all the Hitler Youth members, who were overcome with emotion in hearing him speak; in that moment, Heck “belonged to Adolf Hitler body and soul.”⁴⁴ Their admiration for Hitler and the Nazi ideal turned to shock when Germany collapsed and suffered through the postwar period.

⁴² Neumeier, “Interview,” 4.

⁴³ Tubach, *German Voices*, 43.

⁴⁴ Heck, *Child of Hitler*, 23.

Having been convinced of the invincibility of their Führer, Nazi Regime, and organization, Hitler Youth members questioned why Hitler's Third Reich failed so miserably against the Allied powers. As the Nazi organization failed to protect them when they suffered from postwar depression, German youths began to portray themselves as victims rather than perpetrators of Nazi actions, hence Grass' observation: "The crimes coming to light with peace, the flip side of war, were making victims out of perpetrators."⁴⁵ The victimization of the Hitler Youth kept them from admitting to themselves and others their complicity in furthering the Nazi cause against the Jews, raising the question of whether or not they were blameless. Although the Hitler Youth members often naively participated in their activities without fully understanding the actual indirect purposes—the effects of displaying power and superiority over younger members, for example—they were ultimately indoctrinated into having a sense of a strong nationalistic and racial superiority.

In the postwar period, they were held accountable for their actions against the Jewish race, regardless of their indoctrination as youths. According to historian Tony Judt, postwar Germany had been democratized and "raised to see Nazism as responsible for war and defeat; but its truly awful aspects were consistently downplayed."⁴⁶ When the Adolf Eichmann trial occurred in 1960 in Jerusalem along with the Auschwitz trials later in Frankfurt, the German public became exposed to the evils of the Nazi regime. German youth radicals of the 1960s then began to claim that the Bonn Republic in West Germany actively sought to cover crimes formerly committed by Nazi youths and failed to allow Germans to confront their past—"as a result, in the eyes of their sons and daughters they stood for nothing. Their material achievements were tainted by their

⁴⁵ Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, 240.

⁴⁶ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 416.

moral inheritance.”⁴⁷ These postwar protests represent the guilt former Nazi youths faced as a refusal of taking responsibility. Erich Neumeier admitted having “troubles being classified as a ‘Nazi’ criminal,” mainly because he, like many other German youths, felt that “I was doing the same as the American GIs – defending my country.”⁴⁸ However, as Günter Grass explains in his memoir, “Guilt—whether proven, presumed, or concealed—remains. . . . It says its piece, fears no repetition, is mercifully forgotten for a time, and hibernates in our dreams.”⁴⁹

The negative attitudes of the German youths impacted the reception towards democratization as a failure in the short term, making it initially difficult to undo the damage of Nazi indoctrination. Former Hitler Youth members who became Allied prisoners of war felt bitter resentment in losing to the Allies and were dehumanized through their experiences as Nazi fighting machines. For instance, Heck was captured by French military occupiers, who sent him to a penitentiary in Wittlich as a prisoner of war when they found out he was a Hitler Youth leader (*Bannführer*). He went through a process of reeducation, recalling a time when he viewed documentary films of death camps with indifference:

The mountains of emaciated corpses had the opposite effect from what our conquerors intended. We thought they were fakes, posed to indict all Germans. The French became so incensed by our indifference that they rammed us with rifle butts. It was some time before I could accept the truth of the Holocaust, nearly three decades more before I could write or speak about German guilt and responsibility.⁵⁰

In a similar way, Günter Grass faced the challenges as a POW when there were rumors that prisoners would be transferred to

⁴⁷ Ibid., 417.

⁴⁸ Neumeier, “Interview,” 4.

⁴⁹ Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, 28.

⁵⁰ Heck, *Child of Hitler*, 204-205.

the Soviet zone—great fear struck the hearts of many prisoners. Grass also mentioned “rumors of a mass release of prisoners, occasionally combined with talk of shipping the youngest inmates off for reeducation: to America! They’ll knock the Hitler Youth out of you, the older soldiers jeered.”⁵¹ The harsh scare tactics that the Allies instigated began to influence the POWs, who were radically changed through the reeducation process—“completely unprepared for a West Germany in the throes of rapid economic growth and expansion, POWs appeared as sage observers from another age.”⁵²

The German youths encountered in their postwar lives a stage of reexamination of their values, focusing mainly on their present survival rather than speaking out on their atrocities as Nazi youths. Having been let down by the fall of the Third Reich and rejection by the Allies as Nazi criminals, the youths distrusted their older authorities. As the Nazi foundations that they wholeheartedly followed became destroyed, the youths were unsure of where to place their faith; they therefore frequently withdrew from the community and maintained a focus only within themselves.⁵³ These youths displayed a disinterest towards government matters, taking no sides in party politics regarding democracy, Nazism, or otherwise — “by all accounts most Germans were intent on one thing, *das Überleben*, or mere survival, and Allied armies were grappling to impose a victor’s order on the wartime chaos.”⁵⁴ However, their social adaptation in a postwar Germany that was slowly becoming renewed as a nationalist state influenced the evolution of their ideals over time. Algot Joensson, who became a national director of an affiliate of the Swedish Trade Union Federation in 1941, provided his perspective on democracy

⁵¹ Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, 188.

⁵² Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 90.

⁵³ Kater, *Hitler Youth*, 257.

⁵⁴ Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany*, 1.

when compiling an observational report of the Bavarian areas struck by postwar devastation. He urgently called for the creation of democracy to rebuild Germany, an initiative that would be led by its youth, and argued for trade unions to become the “core of democracy.”⁵⁵ His argument sought to train youth to become progressive contributors in rebuilding the German society and aiding in its democratic development: this call was made “in order to be able to reach a judgment on a problem, [the German youth] will demand facts and, eventually, they will learn respect for facts, for the view of other people and for people themselves—a respect which is quite necessary in a democracy.”⁵⁶

German youths in the western zones were also influenced by democratic youth organizations, which were headed by the Education and Religious Affairs Branch with foreign military officials guiding their activities.⁵⁷ According to the U.S. military’s program guidelines, the democratization process in these organizations would be “achieved by acquainting the young people with such activities and interests as woodcrafts and athletics that were normal to youths of similar age in the United States.”⁵⁸ One German youth, Manfred Fischer, who was chosen to participate in this re-indoctrination process, loved this experience, in which “good food, fireside meetings, talks about America, and simple interactions with the American soldiers in charge of the youth camp filled the days.”⁵⁹ These

⁵⁵ Algot Joensson, *Organized Labor and Democracy in Germany*, Office of the Military Government for Germany (U.S.), Manpower Division, Visiting Expert Series No. 15, October 1949, *University of Wisconsin, The History Collection Database*, 9.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁷ *The U.S. Armed Forces German Youth Activities Program*, Historical Division Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, 1956, *University of Wisconsin The History Collection Database*, 2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁹ Tubach, *German Voices*, 153. Upon the arrival of American soldiers occupying German territory, Fischer had lived with

organizations represented a quasi-*Hitlerjugend* that encouraged the spread of democracy rather than the Nazi cause. Most importantly, they helped to guide former Hitler Youths to eventually find their way toward democracy in a newly developed Germany and, thus, to move Germany toward the healing of its psyche.

Legacy of Democratization in Postwar Germany

One major effect stemming from the democratization process was the fracturing of unity between East and West Germany. Differences occurred in democratization procedures of the Eastern zone of Russia and the Western zones of America, Britain, and France that almost hindered the growth of a new German nationalism. According to German intellectuals, Germany suffered from “post-fascist democratic deficit” in which they sought to create stronger democratic institutions that pushed against totalitarianism, but struggled to identify with them.⁶⁰ With American influences, West Germany actively pursued an effective democracy, modeled differently from the pre-Nazi Weimar Republic, to combat against Nazism; this zone became increasingly westernized. Conversely, Russia’s ruthless denazification process created in the East German zone “a seemingly ‘more German Germany’ steeped in authoritarianism.”⁶¹ For instance, the Free German Youth (FDJ) was established as a youth organization similar to those in the Western zones but with communist purposes. While the organization sought to convert its young members by including “fun into their activities, using some of the same techniques as the Hitler Youth,” its main focus was to develop the political

American GIs, who used his home for U.S. Army Headquarters; he created a bond and admiration for these Americans despite their takeover.

⁶⁰ Müller, *Another Country*, 9.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

education system based on socialism.⁶² This cruel re-indoctrination and aggression of Communists on Eastern Germany is reflected in the tales of German refugees who managed to escape from the Eastern zone during the postwar period—“forcefully separated from their homes and possessions, they desperately needed immediate assistance to compensate them for their losses and integrate them into West German society.”⁶³ As Erich Neumeier expressed, even as a member of the Hitler Youth he did not have much concern for politics or perceptions of the Jews before the postwar period. But following the war, his perceptions and concerns were confused and illustrated the mindset of many Germans:

I was not interested in politics. That the stores of Jews were marked as “Ich Bin Ein Jude” was a fact of daily life and really not much concern to me. After the war, after the Koncentration camp stories became public, I became uncomfortable. But I ask myself what happened to the German prisoners of war in Russia? Even up to date only 20-25% were returned. The rest disappeared forever . . . and Russia was an alliance of the West!⁶⁴

The statistics that Neumeier mentioned foreshadow the fact that in the wake of World War II, the Soviet Union was creating a Communist, totalitarian government in its occupied zone of Eastern Germany rather than aiding in democratization. Thus, the differences between East and West German political ideologies served to further divide Germany and confuse its citizens who were often already lost: in denial, emotionally distraught, and “uncomfortable” with what had transpired under Hitler’s Regime.

⁶² Catherine Plum, *Antifascism After Hitler: East German Youth and Socialist Memory, 1949-1989* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, Routledge, 2015), 46.

⁶³ Moeller, *War Stories*, 22.

⁶⁴ Neumeier, “Interview,” 2-3.

Despite the deep political divisions within East and West Germany, the overall process of democratization throughout Germany effectively helped restore over time a new German nation that had formerly been ravaged by postwar crisis. American foreign occupiers established their influence and new organizations, such as the Social Democratic Party led by politicians like Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who sought to improve the nation's postwar government. As a result, Germany eventually transformed into a developed and, once again advanced, nation. Erich Neumeier had moved away from Germany in 1954, due to the slow recovery of the national economy. He established his home in the United States, where prosperity and "easy money" kept him from returning to Germany. However, after fifteen to twenty years, he arrived in Germany again, only to find its massive transformation. Erich and his wife "felt we did not belong the[re] anymore. Only my brot[h]ers family was importend [important]. Most of our friends had moved and were not in Ingolstadt anymore."⁶⁵ With the transformation of the West German nation came the transformation of its youth, who eventually understood and accepted the evils of Nazism and began to work through their guilt and embarrassment. The processes of denazification and democratization were necessary for Germans to come to terms with their past, helping them become a stronger nation in facing the consequences for their actions—in doing so, "acknowledgement of their losses unified West Germans; it became central to defining the Federal Republic as a nation of victims."⁶⁶ In eventually accepting their responsibility for Nazi atrocities, many former Hitler Youths were able to record accounts of their perspectives towards Nazism and democracy, as the past was no longer painful. Their responses helped Germany move one step closer towards successful democratization in the long term.

⁶⁵ Neumeier, "Interview," 4-5.

⁶⁶ Moeller, *War Stories*, 22.

Conclusion

While the initial development of democratization was an ineffective failure in the short term, it gradually gained success, as the new West German nation evolved economically and politically due to the efforts of groups like labor unions and former Hitler Youth who had come to terms, as best as they could, with what had occurred during the war.

These former Hitler Youth members began to heal and work toward uniting the new German youth in their efforts to democratize Germany. The Hitler Youth's indoctrination into National Socialism effectively trained its members as soldiers for the Third Reich. Yet according to former members Alfons Heck and Luftwaffe pilot Erich Neumeier, the organization's appeal for them lay in athletics and social fellowship, which used the naiveté of its members to carry out the Nazi cause. After World War II and Nazi atrocities wreaked havoc on Europe and the Nazi state collapsed, former Hitler Youth members struggled to return to normalcy, initially rejecting Allied efforts of democratization in the process. Nevertheless, decades of demilitarization, denazification, reconstruction, and democratization, whether through other youth organizations or experiences in POW camps, helped fully convince Germany's youth of the positive values of democracy. By accepting and taking responsibility for their actions, the former Hitler Youth helped Germany emerge out of the economic and political wreckage of World War II to become a new democratic nation. Hitler successfully indoctrinated the German youth and believed he would through them secure Germany's future in National Socialism; however, as postwar Germany rose from its devastation, so too did its people as they learned to remember, rather than forget their past—"Memory likes to play hide-and-seek, to crawl away. . . . When pestered with questions, memory is like an onion that wishes to be peeled so we can read what is laid bare letter by letter."⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the youth

⁶⁷ Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, 3.

of Germany, which formerly symbolized the Nazi cause, became the true hope for Germany in its democratization and its steps toward healing the German spirit.

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