The Nazis’ Impact on Young People

Why were young people so important to the Nazis?

In 1935 Hitler made a speech in which he said to those who opposed him: “In a few years you will be dead but your children will live after you. We already have the loyalty of these children. Because of them our victory is assured. And your defeat is certain!”

The Nazis knew that if they were going to change Germany then it was important to get people to believe in Nazi ideas (ideology). If they could succeed in this, then Germans would willingly cooperate with them in building a ‘new Germany’. The most important part of this was children. If they could be won over to support the Nazis then the future of Germany would be a Nazi one. Soon those who opposed Nazi beliefs - and who remembered the kind of Germany before the Nazis came to power - would be dead. But the next generation of Germans would only have known Nazi propaganda. They would loyally support the Nazis and their aims for Germany – and the world.

What were the aims of the Nazis for young people?

The Nazis hoped that by indoctrinating young people with Nazi ideas they would eventually create Germans who were totally in agreement with Nazi beliefs and aims.

The Hitler Youth

The Hitler Youth provided after-school and weekend activities for 10 to 18 year olds. There were separate organisations for boys and girls.

The task of the boys section was to prepare the boys for military service:

- At 10, joined the German Young People, until the age of 13 when they transferred to the Hitler Youth until the age of 18.

Activities

- Activities were dominated by physical rather than intellectual activities. By 1936, the ‘military athletics’ course they followed included: marching, bayonet drill, grenade throwing, trench digging, map reading, gas defence, use of dugouts, how to get under barbed wire and pistol shooting.
- Nazi beliefs about the need to conquer new territory (especially in Eastern Europe) and take land from people thought to be inferior played a key part in the education of boys.
- The task of the girls section was to prepare them for motherhood:
  - Girls, at the age of 10, joined the League of Young Girls and at the age of 14 transferred to the League of German Girls.
  - Activities were again dominated by physical ones. Girls had to be able to run 60 metres in 14 seconds, throw a ball 12 metres, complete a 2 hour march and swim 100 metres. The rest of the activities were focused on domestic activities and looking after children.
- Nazi beliefs about race and the removal of those thought to be inferior played a large part in girls’ education.

Schools

At school new subjects such as Race Science taught children that Germans were superior to other races; and especially that Jews were to blame for Germany’s problems. In the more traditional subjects, such as History, the Nazi version of the past was taught. Even in Maths the problems solved were about how much fuel a bomber would need to attack enemy cities. Teachers who objected were sacked. Many though willingly went along with these Nazi plans for education.

Activities

1. Describe the kind of family this poster shows.
2. Look at the spidergram ‘Nazi policies towards women and young people’. List the Nazi ideas that you can find in this poster.

Source A. The Ideal Nazi Family from a 1930s poster.

3. Explain why the Nazis thought that controlling young people was so important.
4. How similar and different was Nazi education for boys and girls?
How successful was the Hitler Youth in winning young people over to the Nazis?

Huge numbers of young people joined the Hitler Youth. And many became firm believers in Nazi ideas. During WW2 some of the fiercest fighting that US and British soldiers faced in the battle for Normandy, in France, in 1944 was against SS soldiers from the Hitler Youth Division.

But the situation was complicated. Youth groups were popular before 1933 and when Hitler came to power all of these youth groups, apart from the Catholic Youth Movement (which was banned in 1939) were dissolved. Many children were later forced to join the Hitler Youth but it is hard to say how prepared they were to believe Nazi ideas. There is evidence that by 1939 about 40% of German young people failed to regularly attend Hitler Youth meetings. Were they just bored with them? Or were they rebelling because they did not believe in what they were being taught? It is hard to tell.

Other young people enjoyed American ‘Swing Music’, which the Nazis hated. Some young people from working class areas of German cities formed gangs such as the ‘Edelweiss pirates’ who boycotted Hitler Youth activities and during the war attacked Hitler Youth patrols. At Munich University the White Rose movement produced anti-war leaflets and its leaders were executed in 1943. It is difficult though to be sure how many joined such groups. And how much support they had from other young people. This is because the Nazis controlled German newspapers and radio and crushed any groups of young people who openly resisted them.

The Nazis’ impact on women

What was the importance of women to the Nazi State?

If Nazis wanted a future world of ‘German’ people who believed in their ideas, then the women who would be bearing and bringing up these children would play a huge part in this. Hitler saw men and women as very different who had very different roles and responsibilities in the ‘new’ Germany.

What were the aims of the Nazis for women?

What the Nazis wanted from women in their society was really quite simple – they wanted, and needed them to produce their ‘master race’ of perfect German children. Mothers were portrayed as heroines of the German Nation in Nazi propaganda, stories and radio programmes and there were rewards and incentives for women who had children:

- The Law for the Encouragement of Marriage in 1933 stated that all couples who married would get a loan from the government of 1000 marks. For every child the couple had, 25% of the loan could be kept by them. This meant that if the couple had four children, they did not have to pay back the loan at all!
- Mother’s crosses were awarded – a bronze cross for four children, a silver cross for six and a gold cross for eight.
- There were Mother’s Schools which ran courses in looking after the home and bringing up children.
- However, there were other, more negative policies which were aimed at encouraging women to play their roles as wives and mothers.

- From the beginning there were pressures to exclude women from jobs in teaching, the civil service, politics, medicine and the law.
- Young women were discouraged from going to university. In 1934 it was ruled that the number of girls entering higher education should be just 10% of the male students.

Activities

5. Explain how the Nazis made it clear in Source B that they hated Swing music?
6. ‘Despite all their efforts, the Nazis failed in their plan to totally control German young people.’ From the evidence, how far do you agree/disagree with this opinion?
   - Explain the evidence which agrees with it.
   - Explain the evidence which disagrees with it.
   - Decide how much you agree - and explain why.
How successful were Nazi policies towards women?

Generally, the ideology of a woman’s place being in the home, looking after her husband and children was popular, not just in Germany but all over Europe. Therefore many of the Nazi policies in this area found support.

There were of course some women who suffered under these measures. Many professional women lost their jobs and those girls who had ambitions in the work place were generally disappointed as discrimination was actively encouraged. There were women who opposed the Nazis, although it is difficult to know how many. Those who protested publically were usually put into concentration camps, some of which were created specifically for women.

However, there was quite a big difference between the Nazi ideal of women staying at home and the reality of improving the German economy and rearming for war. Indeed, there were serious shortages in the number of workers and therefore women were employed in increasingly large numbers as time went on. Indeed, by 1939 women made up 37% of the German workforce. During the war itself, women were increasingly called to fill positions left vacant by men who had gone to fight.

Think further!

1. REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE A GERMAN.
2. IF YOU ARE GENETICALLY HEALTHY YOU SHOULD NOT REMAIN UNMARRIED.
3. KEEP YOUR BODY PURE.
4. YOU SHOULD KEEP YOUR MIND AND SPIRIT PURE.
5. AS A GERMAN CHOOSE ONLY A SPOUSE OF THE SAME OR NORDIC BLOOD.
6. IN CHOOSING A SPOUSE, ASK ABOUT HIS ANCESTORS.
7. HEALTH IS ALSO A PRECONDITION FOR PHYSICAL BEAUTY.
8. MARRY ONLY FOR LOVE.
9. DON’T LOOK FOR A PLAYMATE BUT FOR A COMPANION FOR MARRIAGE.
10. YOU SHOULD WANT TO HAVE AS MANY CHILDREN AS POSSIBLE.

The Nazi plan was to control every part of Germany society if anyone resisted them they could be discovered by the Gestapo secret police and imprisoned in the concentration camps. But the Nazis did not just want to rely on force. They wanted the German people to believe in them and to support the Nazis willingly. In youth groups and in school a lot of effort was put into controlling the minds of young people. The hope was that this new generation of Germans would provide the loyal soldiers who would conquer new land and the loyal mothers who would happily raise large families of healthy, happy Germans. Brave young soldiers were given ‘Iron Crosses’ and young women were given ‘Mother Crosses’ for the part they were playing in building the new Germany’.


creating a perfect Aryan nation

The rules, laws and policies for young people and women described in this section, only applied to those who were seen as racially perfect. Jewish women and children, gypsies, mentally or physically disabled women and children and others who did not conform to Nazi ideas of racial superiority were treated very differently. However, racial laws and Nazi ideas about race indirectly affected all women and young people. Theories about race and genetics were a large part of the curriculum in schools and the classes and activities run by Hitler Youth and women’s groups. There was heavy censorship of books and newspapers which meant that only ideas of which the Nazis approved could be read and there were large amounts of propaganda, the aims of which were to indoctrinate Nazi ideas across society. However, it is difficult for historians to assess how far these ideas were actually believed by people at the time.

As with men in Nazi Germany, the experiences of women and young people varied dramatically depending on their race. We will learn more about what happened to those people who did not fulfil Nazi ideas of racial perfection in Chapter 9.