
The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the first October meeting of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II Roundtable. Our topic tonight is the History of the Hitler Youth and our speakers are Don Gregory and Wilhelm Gehlen, the co-authors of *Jungvolk: The Story of a Boy Defending Hitler's Third Reich*. We are also privileged to have several Hitler Youth members here to talk about their experiences.

The Hitler *Jugend* (The Hitler Youth or HJ) did not spring forth like Athena from the head of Zeus, but grew out of the *Wandervogel* movements in the late 19th century, which encouraged young German men to return to their pre-modern, rural, Teutonic roots.

The Pan-German Youth associations grew before the First World War and with the post-war chaos in Germany provided young people a sense of stability and belonging along with independence from paternal authority. Every political party and religious group had their own youth groups, such as the Young Socialists, the Young Conservatives, and Youth Catholic Associations. These groups were much like the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts focusing on nature, crafts, and citizenship.

The HJ was the most successful of all the Nazi mass movements. Originating in the *Jugendbund der NSDAP* during the early years of the party, it was only a section of the SA (*Sturmarbeitteilung*), and as the National Socialist Party grew so did the HJ. The group's fortunes were intricately tied to the Nazi party, and as the SA fell out of favor the HJ became a separate entity under the dynamic leadership of *Reichleiter* Baldur von Schirach. By 1936, the HJ had absorbed all other youth groups with the singular exception of the Catholic Youth Associations, which did not dissolve until 1939 when participation in the HJ became compulsory.

The HJ was divided into several groups: The Hitler Jugend (proper) for boys 14 to 18 years of age; The *Jungvolk* for boys 10-14, The *Bund Deutscher Mädel* the German Girls Association for girls 14-18; The *Jung Mädel* for girls 10-14; and after 1938, girls after 18 moved to the '*Glaube und Schönheit*' (Faith and Beauty). These youth groups offered exciting leisure activities such as camping, bicycle rides, overnight hiking trips, and sports. Competition was stressed in the HJ, with boys and girls competing in athletic events to make them strong and also enhance the martial spirit, even as gender roles were still maintained. While the boys were taught to be good soldiers learning to

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march, shoot, and engage in field exercises, the girls followed the traditional roles for women in German society, *Kinder, Kirche, Küche* (children, church, kitchen). The *Bund Deutscher Mädel* girls were assigned to help care for wounded soldiers in hospitals, to help in kindergartens, and to assist households with large families, while the *Jung Mädel* made crafts for soldiers and learned songs.

While the HJ made young people physically strong and the Nazi ideology lessons made them good party members, there were more pernicious side effects. Children often became closer to the HJ groups than their own families, and were encouraged to report any anything that might be considered against the party. In addition, the HJ activities led to a decline in academic standards. With the mandatory meetings and exercise, students could not stay awake to do their homework, but students did not have to worry, HJ services were weighed into a student's records as a way to offset academic deficiencies. Before the Nazi's, Germany's schools ranked among the best in the world, but the lack of emphasis on academics led to their decline. For the party, it was more important to be a good Hitler Youth than to be a good student. Examples, of this can be seen in the book *Jungvolk* when young Wilhelm Gehlen collected scrap metal or weeds for medicine to get out of a couple days homework.

As the war began HJ members were put into action to lead scrap metal drives, find medicinal weeds, and keep an eye out for unpatriotic neighbors. When

Germany's military fortunes dwindled, HJ members were incorporated into military units; being assigned to man anti-aircraft guns, front-line infantry units and they even had their own division, the 12th SS-Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend*.

Due to the loss of manpower the HJ were the last defenders of the Reich. When the war ended those who survived tried to help their families survive the transition and returned to school. At the end of the war the former HJ *Reichleiter* Baldur Schirach received a twenty year jail sentence for his part in the war.

More Reading on Tonight's Topic:

Wilhelm Gehlen and Don Gregory, *Jungvolk: The Story of a Boy Defending Hitler's Third Reich* (Philadelphia, PA: Casemate 2008)

Alfons Heck, *A Child of Hitler: Germany in the Days when God wore a Swastika*. (Frederick, Colorado: Renaissance House 1985).

Susan Campbell Bartoletti *Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler's Shadow* (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 2005).

Henry Metelmann *A Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Germany in the 1930s* (London UK: Spellmount, 2004).

Irmgard A. Hunt *On Hitler's Mountain: Overcoming the Legacy of a Nazi Childhood* (New York: Harper Books, 2006).

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