



HISTORY STORIES

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# How the Hitler Youth Turned a Generation of Kids Into Nazis

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The Boy Scouts' motto was "Be Prepared." But nothing could prepare Max Ebel, a German teenager, for what happened after Hitler banned the Boy Scouts. As other boys cheered, the 17-year-old was [surrounded](#) by a gang of Nazi Youth—one of whom had a knife. Ebel's refusal to leave scouting behind had just turned into a fight for his life.

It was 1937, and the Boy Scouts were one of many youth organizations on the Nazis' *verboten* list. Now, every non-Jewish boy in Germany was required to be part of the Hitler Youth, the Nazis' youth arm, instead. Ebel, a pacifist who distrusted the Nazis, refused—and paid the price.

The Boy Scout was harassed and then [attacked](#) by a group of Nazi Youth. In an attempt to force him to join, one of the members stabbed him in the hand. Ebel fought back, grabbed the knife, and cut the other boy's face. Later, realizing his life was in danger, he escaped Germany and eventually became a U.S. citizen.

Ebel was just one of millions of young Germans whose lives were changed by the Hitler Youth—a group designed to indoctrinate kids into Hitler's ideology, then send them off to war.

By the time Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, hundreds of thousands of kids were members of youth organizations like the Boy Scouts, which was invented in England in 1909 and quickly spread to Germany. But there was also another powerful youth movement afoot—one invented by the Nazis. Since 1922, the National Socialists had had a youth arm designed to train and recruit members for its paramilitary. As the Nazis became more powerful, their youth arm grew.

In January 1933, there were 50,000 members of the Hitler Youth. By the end of the year, there were more than 2 million. And as the 1930s progressed, the Nazis waged war on the groups so popular among German youth. First they banned children's groups associated with political movements like Communism. And in 1936, they banned all youth groups—including the Boy Scouts—and forced members to become part of the Hitler Youth instead. Jewish children were banned from participation.

Banning scouting sent a message—obey, or be punished. It had a practical effect, too: Since other scouting organizations were banned, the only way for kids to get scouting experience was to join the Hitler Youth. As Germany hurtled toward war, children who refused to join were alienated, then punished. By 1939, over 90 percent of German children were part of the Hitler Youth organization.

For the Nazis, the group had other benefits. Not only did it allow the Third Reich to indoctrinate children at their most impressionable, but it let the Nazis remove them from the influence of their parents, some of whom opposed the regime. The Nazi Party knew that families—private, cohesive groups not usually under political sway—were an obstacle to their goals. The Hitler Youth was a way to get Hitler's ideology into the family unit, and some members of the Hitler Youth even denounced their parents when they behaved in ways not approved of by the Reich.

Though the Boy Scouts were banned, the Nazis co-opted many of its activities and traditions. Hitler Youth took part in typical scouting type activities like camping trips, singing, crafts and hiking. They went to summer camps, wore uniforms, recited pledges and told stories over campfires.

But over time, the activities changed. Though girls' groups focused on things like rhythmic gymnastics and winter coat drives, the boys' groups became more like a mini military than a Boy Scout den. They imposed military-like order on members and trained young men in everything from weapons to survival. And all groups included hefty doses of propaganda that encouraged an almost religious devotion to the Führer.

Alfons Heck's experience was typical. As he told the *Boston Globe* in the 1980s, he couldn't wait to become a full-fledged Hitler Youth member and relished marching, singing and attending rallies. "I belonged to Adolf Hitler, body and soul," he recalled. It took him years to step away from that indoctrination after the end of World War II.

Some boys refused to join the Hitler Youth and took their youth groups underground. One such group, the Edelweiss Pirates, even attacked Hitler Youth members and worked to sabotage their activities. About 5,000 Edelweiss Pirates are thought to have defied the Nazis, scribbled anti-war graffiti on walls, and participated in various types of violent and nonviolent resistance. In 1944, six were hanged in Cologne without a trial due to their suspected involvement in the black market. Scouts in occupied countries resisted, too: In France, for example, Boy Scouts rescued 40 Jewish children from deportation, and in Auschwitz, a group of Polish boy scouts resisted and even escaped the Nazis.

As the war ground on, it became clear that the Hitler Youth's real goal was to create more soldiers for the Reich. Children who had been saturated in Nazi ideology for years made obedient, fanatical soldiers. Eventually, those soldiers became younger and younger. Starting in 1943, all boys 17 and older were forced to serve in the military.

In 1945, the desperate Nazi leadership began pulling younger boys out of school and sending them to the front. These inexperienced children were essentially conscripted for suicide missions—and if they balked, they were [executed](#). Those who survived faced harsh treatment at the hands of the Allies who captured them.

After the war, the Hitler Youth was disbanded. Today, the group is considered one of the most chilling facets of the Nazi regime—proof that a totalitarian state can use children to feed its armies and further its hateful ideologies.

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