

Heinrich Himmler, Decree on Youth Gangs (October 25, 1944)

Abstract

What constitutes an act of resistance? Certainly, one can point to the examples of outright defiance of the Nazi regime by organizations like the Kreisau Circle or the youth protestors in the White Rose at Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich. But what of smaller acts of resistance, those that could be labeled passive, such as joking about the Führer, or skipping out on a meeting of the local Hitler Youth after school? Do these small acts constitute resistance?

Most generally, open and active resistance to Hitler's government was minimal and the vast majority of Germans accepted the Nazis' rule for 12-years. But that did not mean that frustration and personal opinions about the Nazi Party or the regime's leaders and actions did not exist. This document, a decree on the spread of youth gangs in Germany, reveals acts of defiance against the regime that did not go unnoticed. While this decree comes in 1944, it reflects an endemic problem throughout the years of the Third Reich. Some youth rejected the disciplined and martial activities of the Hitler Youth and shirked afterschool programs to frequent jazz and swing clubs. Himmler, however, attributes this activity to the deterioration of a clear family structure during war, as fathers fought on the frontlines. The difficulty, here, for historians, is to evaluate the degree to which these activities, some that could be easily interpreted as teenage rebellious behavior, constituted active defiance of the regime and its racial goals.

Source

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Memorandum to all Security Services and Police

Throughout the Reich, especially in large cities, associations of youth (gangs) have been forming in ever-increasing numbers of late. In part, these gangs exhibit criminal, antisocial, or oppositional political tendencies and therefore require intensified surveillance, especially in view of the absence due to the war of many fathers, Hitler Youth leaders, and educators.

All youth associations must be watched closely and appropriate steps must be taken against them as needed. In carrying out the following orders, it must always be borne in mind that such phenomena among young people cannot be combated only by means of police coercion and judicial punishment, but that preventive educational measures must above all be aimed at improving the basic attitude of young people.

I. Variety and Appearance of Gangs

Gangs are associations of youth who are not in the Hitler Youth and who lead a separate and extraordinary existence based on principles not in accordance with National Socialist ideology. They all share a rejection of or disinterest toward their obligations within the *Volksgemeinschaft* or the Hitler Youth; this is especially evidenced in their lack of willingness to conform to the exigencies of war.

These gangs have made their appearance under a variety of names (clique, mob, gang, pack, the

Platters, the Shufflers, the Edelweiss Pirates, and so on). A centralized organization does not, in general, exist. Outward association is often only very loose and irregular. Occasionally they wear special identifying insignia (for example, an edelweiss emblem, death's-head ring, colored pins, and the like). Membership dues are usually not collected, but in some cases identification insignia are issued. The gangs more or less have their regular meeting places and operating territories; they often go on outings together. Between certain gangs cross-communication does exist. This can be of a friendly or of an antagonistic nature. It is primarily young lads who belong to these gangs, but there are a few girls as well.

Formation of a gang usually involves common affiliation in a factory, school, some other organization, or simply [through] residing in the same district. Initially, such associations can be quite harmless (street friendships, standing at corners together, and so forth); later, however, depending on prevailing convictions and goals, ominous developments can ensue. It is not unusual to be able to trace this activity back to a single anti-social or criminally inclined fellow who knows how to bring the others to heel and can SB direct their harmless desire for adventure instead toward dangerous avenues. Generally, three different basic forms of behavior can be determined, although it must be noted that few gangs exhibit only one of these basic characteristics in pronounced form. Moreover, activity of one particular kind most often leads to activity of another kind. We have isolated the following:

Groups of *antisocial* orientation. This is characterized by acts of minor to serious criminal offenses (mischief, brawling, violations of police directives, petty larceny, sexual offenses—especially those involving members of the same sex, and so on ...)

Gangs of *oppositional political* orientation, although not always with a well-defined program of opposition. Their orientation is marked by generally seditious behavior, rejection of the Hitler Youth and other community obligations, indifference toward the conduct of the war, engaging in disruptions of youth service obligations, attacks on Hitler Youth members, listening to foreign radio broadcasts, dissemination of rumors, maintaining the traditions, song repertoire, and the like of the prohibited federated [youth] groups or of other groups. Youth of this orientation frequently attempt to infiltrate [Nazi] Party organizations in order to provide a screen for themselves or in order to have the possibility for subversive actions

Gangs of a *liberal-individualist* orientation, characterized by a predilection for English ideals, language, demeanor, dress (English casual), cultivation of fast music, jazz and swing, etc. The members of these gangs come primarily from the “upper middle class” and want to pursue their own pleasure and sexual or other excesses. They thereby soon conflict sharply with National Socialist ideology. They resist directives from the Hitler Youth, Labor Service, and military service and acquire the behavioral characteristics listed under item b.

The members of gangs can be differentiated, based on the degree of their participation, into leaders, active participants, and nominal members (hangers-on).

Leaders of the gangs (ringleaders) are—not that a solid leadership always exists—one or more people, often even adults or foreigners who have asserted themselves through exceptional intelligence, initiative, or brutality. Some have previous criminal records; some are former members of earlier

federated (youth) or other oppositional political circles. They are only seldom members of the Hitler Youth. If, however, they are Hitler Youth members, they do not do their duties, do them only reluctantly, or have already withdrawn from the Hitler Youth due to certain offenses or loss of interest. Cases have been documented, however, where they have performed their duties flawlessly in order not to arouse any outward suspicion.

Some of the active members and hangers-on of the gangs also have previous criminal records or come from disorderly family circumstances and antisocial clans. Others, however, come from respectable families and are themselves basically still decent. In many cases, they were moved to join because of negligent parents (neglect of educational and supervisory responsibilities) or because of a misguided craving for adventure, romantic conceptions, or for other puberty-related reasons.

The members of a gang frequently exhibit identical styles of clothing, hair fashions, and behavior and often have nicknames derived from the images of their perceived world or from their approved stock of ideas. Because of the war, many youth have been left largely to their own devices. Gangs therefore exert a strong attraction on these youth and for that matter even on decent young people.

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Source of English translation: Anson Rabinbach and Sander Gilman, eds., *The Third Reich Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013, pp. 860-861. With some additional translation by GHI staff.

Source of original German text: Detlev Peukert, ed., *Die Edelweisspiraten: Protestbewegungen jugendlicher Arbeiter im Dritten Reich: eine Dokumentation*. Cologne: Bund-Verlag, 1983, pp.123-33.

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