Reich Ministry of Justice Report on the Emergence of "Youth Cliques and Gangs" (1944)

Abstract

The monopolistic and coercive nature of the Hitler Youth after 1933 was supposed to ensure that all children and young people conformed to National Socialism and were educated according to its principles. It could not, however, prevent the formation of several oppositional groups, whose members rejected the Hitler Youth's mandatory membership policy and opposed its militaristic drills in particular. The Edelweiss Pirates and the Swing Youth, both of which are mentioned in the following text, were two of the most widely known oppositional groups. Both groups were non-political and primarily interested in maintaining their own individuality. But because group members refused to join the Hitler Youth, they were persecuted by the Gestapo. The following Ministry of Justice report from 1944 makes clear that the regime viewed any type of behavior that deviated from Nazi dictates as intolerable and potentially subversive.

Source

The problem of the threat to youth and juvenile criminality manifests itself in particular in the formation of youth gangs. For, since the beginning of the war, and above all since the start of the terror air raids, there has been an increasing number of reports about combinations of young people who are pursuing partly criminal, but also to some extent political and ideological, goals.

[…]

In Gelsenkirchen a gang of approximately fifty young people were involved in thefts and robberies. They called themselves "Edelweiss Pirates," met together every evening and were opposed to the HJ. Similar observations have been made in Essen, Bochum and Wattenscheid. In Cologne the Edelweiss Pirates have also made an appearance. They carried out propaganda for the *bündisch* youth [see below] and printed leaflets.

Düsseldorf has also reported Edelweiss Pirates who, in addition to harmless ringing of doorbells, have beaten up pedestrians. In some cases they have smeared human excrement on the faces of other national comrades. There was a particular increase in attacks on HJ members.

The same conditions are prevalent in Leipzig, for example; there a large number of young people set up a party-like organization in order to oppose state childrearing [*staatliche Jugenderziehung*] and to beat up members of the HJ.

In Wismar/Mecklenburg, young people founded groups with the same aim. In addition, they aimed to disrupt law and order in the state and were prepared to mount armed attacks on the police. In the event of revolution they intended to string up the HJ patrols and the HJ leadership from trees. Their attitude was deliberately anti-German. In Düsseldorf the gang "Club of the Golden Horde" printed pamphlets with the heading "Down with Hitler—we want freedom." In Duisburg the Edelweiss or Kittelsbach Pirates became active in opposition to the HJ.

Finally, there are several reports of illegal youth associations which are essentially liberal with a clear tendency towards an "easy-going English life style." The main representatives are the so-called "Swing" gangs, who were particularly evident in Hamburg, but also in other parts of the Reich, e.g., Dresden and

Vienna.

This section alone suffices to show that we are dealing with three different sorts of gangs:

a) Politically hostile gangs.
b) Liberal-individualistic gangs.
c) Criminal-antisocial gangs.

Their development has clearly shown that they initially emerged in big cities but then spread to the countryside (possibly through the evacuation measures). In order to combat this problem effectively it is necessary to examine how these gangs came about, what makes them tick, and whether they pose a threat—and what sort of threat—to the state and childrearing.

(a) Politically Hostile Gangs

These associations derive from the so-called *bündisch* youth. It is, therefore, necessary to look briefly at earlier youth movements. Around the turn of the century, a youth movement emerged from the desire to resist the bourgeois superficiality of the Wilhelmine period and to provide youth with a real experience through nature. As time went on, this basically good idea was overlaid by a desire for an autonomous youth, which soon separated youth off from the nation as a whole. A large number of organizations were established, each of which wanted to continue to operate as a league [*Bund*] and pursue its own ideas into adult life. While the HJ educates boys and girls to be efficient national comrades and members of the community, the leagues wanted precisely to pursue a distinct life outside the national community. Their league was their life and gave their life its meaning. They advocated male friendship and thereby encouraged homosexuality among the naive to a horrific extent. Instead of childrearing of the whole community, they chose the principle of selection and favored a distinct lifestyle and the notion of a group bound by fate. The boys themselves had—and this explains the considerable attraction—the satisfying feeling of having their own worldview, which in fact was extremely unclear. In addition, the experience of the *bündisch* young people remained stuck in a false Romanticism which in part descended into a wild criminality or finally into male prostitution. After the change of regime, the *bündisch*—confessional and politically hostile—youth organizations were dissolved or integrated [into the HJ]. But soon a considerable number of groups re-established themselves, which must be regarded as illegal successors to the *bündisch* groups.

The Reich Youth Leadership established a special central office, “West,” to combat these groups, with its HQ in Düsseldorf, which was in operation from 1937–8. With the outbreak of war the groups revived. The politically hostile groups organized mostly *bündisch* or Marxist elements and mainly included young people who had not yet belonged to the HJ or had left it. This partly explains their hostile attitude to the HJ.

The best-known politically hostile group is the Edelweiss Pirates. They organized in the west, namely in Cologne and Düsseldorf, but have subsequently spread over wide areas of the Reich. The Cologne juvenile court judge has recently described their external characteristics in a report. They wear the Edelweiss badge on or under the left lapel or colored pins in the color of the edelweiss or in black, red, and yellow. In so far as they belong to the HJ these badges are worn either openly or secretly on the uniform. One often sees the skull badge. The regulation uniform of the Edelweiss Pirates is short trousers, white socks, a check shirt, a white pullover and scarf and a windcheater. In addition, they have very long hair. A comb is worn in the left sock and a knife in the right one. In so far as girls belong to the gangs they wear white socks, a white pullover or waistcoat. In the warmer months they leave town in their hundreds on foot, by bicycle or train. They distinguish between gatherings and trips. Normally, they meet at night on street corners, in doorways or in parks. They sing their own songs which mostly come from the *bündisch* movement or reflect Russian culture; they exchange experiences from their trips and

report on criminal acts they have committed. There is little homosexuality. Instead, they practice sexual intercourse with the female members. The boys belong mostly to the 14–18-year-old age group. But there are also some pre-teens and adults. The leaders, in particular, who are mostly tough and intelligent, come from previous leagues or from political parties. The members have often not learned a trade or are constantly changing their jobs. There are often absentee workers among them. The organization is divided into groups which are named after streets, squares, parks or bunkers. It is astonishing that groups are marked by common external characteristics. This suggests that an umbrella organization or at least a uniform leadership exists which issues directives. However, this is not certain.

The characteristics described here are also manifest, though sometimes in a slightly different form, in the structure of other groups, which appear under a variety of names, e.g. *Mob, Blasé, Mete, Platte,* or *Schlurf*. They base themselves largely on *bündisch* ideas without being conscious of it and have links with other groups, of either a friendly or a hostile nature.

As is demonstrated by the examples referred to above, most have an anti-HJ attitude, hate all discipline and thereby place themselves in opposition to the community. However, they are not only politically hostile (recently their attitude has reached the point of being hostile to the state), but, as a result of their composition, they are also criminal and antisocial, so that one often cannot make a distinction between the two types of group.

(b) Liberal-Individualistic Gangs

They originated in north Germany, namely in Hamburg. The most striking example among these groups is the so-called Swing Youth, on whom there have been reports from various parts of the Reich. They began in Hamburg. These groups are motivated by the desire to have a good time and have increasingly assumed a character bordering on the criminal-antisocial. Even before the war boys and girls in Hamburg from the socially privileged classes joined groups wearing strikingly casual clothing and became fans of English [US] music and dance. At the turn of the year 1939/40, the Flottbeck group organized dances which were attended by 5–600 young people and which were marked by an uninhibited indulgence in swing. After the ban on public dances they organized dances at home, which were marked above all by sexual promiscuity. The whole lifestyle of these members cost a considerable amount of money which they endeavored to procure through criminal acts and, in particular, through theft. The hunger for English dance music and for their own dance bands led to break-ins in shops selling musical instruments. The greed to participate in what appeared to them to be a stylish life in clubs, bars, cafés and house balls suppressed any positive attitude towards responding to the needs of the time. They were unimpressed by the performance of our Wehrmacht; those killed in action were sometimes held up to ridicule. An attitude of hostility to the war is clearly apparent.

The members dress in clothes which imitate English fashions. Thus, they often wear pleated jackets in tartan designs and carry umbrellas. As a badge they wear a colored dress-shirt button in their lapels. They regard Englishmen as the highest form of human development. A false conception of freedom leads them into opposition to the HJ.

Partly as a result of the evacuation measures, these gangs have spread to other areas. Thus, for example, there was the Harlem Club in Frankfurt am Main, which held house balls of the worst kind. Even the youngest female members indulged in sexual intercourse with several partners consecutively. These parties were marked by alcoholic excesses at which people “swung” and “hotted.”

(c) Criminal-Antisocial Gangs

These groups have no peculiarities. They are a sign of typical degradation to some extent determined by the war. Their members are almost entirely recruited from the offspring of genetically inferior, antisocial family clans. Their personal characteristics normally show the same traits: no criminal convictions, weak-

willed or else very dynamic (the leaders), with an underdeveloped emotional side, in some cases mentally deficient or psychopathic. There are hardly any young people with talent from the socially privileged classes among them. They have no commitment to ideological goals. They follow a leader uncritically to whom they sometimes submit themselves totally.

Reasons for the Increase in Gang Activity

The appeal of the criminal-antisocial groups is primarily due to the fact, as has been mentioned already, that the war has resulted in a reduction in the supervision of young people who are especially liable to indulge in criminal acts and the fact that they are that much more exposed to infection from their environment.

The appeal of the politically hostile and liberal-individualistic groups has other causes in addition:

a) Unmotivated young people are left to themselves a great deal. They avoid HJ duties as far as possible. Abetted by blackouts, they meet in the streets or in the parks, bring along a musical instrument and soon form a group with each person making a contribution to its further development. Here is demonstrated an urge to enjoy a group experience, something which can be regarded as a manifestation of puberty and which is not satisfied by the HJ. In addition, there is the fact that the HJ cannot involve people to the extent it did before the war. Most of its leaders are in the Wehrmacht. The units are often led by young people who are of the same age and do not always possess leadership qualities. The duties themselves offer little that is new. The romantic urge which exists in every boy finds no outlet, particularly since, as a result of wartime necessity, the HJ has ceased its trips. For this reason older, more experienced comrades who had a *bündisch* attitude to life were easily able to attract the young people. At first, there were only small gatherings, but then these turned into outings, which captivated the young people to such an extent that they rejected the HJ.

b) The urge to independence, which is naturally present in certain age groups, cannot be sensibly channeled by the parents, since the fathers are mostly away at the front and the mothers have either been conscripted for war work or are too weak firmly to oppose these activities.

c) The importance of the work problem cannot be underestimated. The deployment of young people in workplaces which they find uncongenial, in addition to the heavy demands being made upon them, produces signs of a lack of enthusiasm or tiredness, which leads to absenteeism. They thereby come into contact with groups which have a bad influence on them. Contact with foreign workers at the workplace contributes towards producing liberal dreams, which the young person endeavors to fulfill in the company of like-minded comrades.

d) As is emphasized by the Cologne Juvenile Court judge, the hostility to the HJ is increased by one fact in particular. As long as it is the police who are enforcing state measures and, in particular, the Police Decree for Youth Protection, incidents generally do not occur. But the HJ patrols and the Youth Service Obligation introduced a new factor. For those who were demanding the maintenance of discipline and order and wanted to stop the outings were now people of the same age. And so fistfights soon broke out between the gang members and the HJ patrols, which led to the destruction of and damage to HJ hostels and finally, to the harassment of individual Hitler youths. This is one reason for the hostile attitude to the HJ and thereby to the state. In some cases, however, there are also Bolshevik notions, which, when spread by a leader, soon find fertile soil.

e) In so far as sexual promiscuity manifests itself, this is mainly the result of a lack of supervision by the parents and thus is the result of the free association of young people with each other.

f) The terror air raids have exacerbated the illegal formation of gangs. Apart from the military duties of the HJ, there are few activities in which they can take part in their spare time. There are no cinema

performances, sporting events or sport in those cities which have been badly damaged. When young people come home in the evenings tired from work, they find a damaged flat or accommodation which has been severely restricted by the need to take in relatives who have lost their homes. In these circumstances the young person seeks company which he enjoys, which provides fun and makes a change. In so far as they are still carrying out HJ duties, these too have changed. The HJ hostels have been destroyed and activities transferred to the streets or the exercise yard.

As far as asocial and criminal young people are concerned, they are driven even more to crime by the terror air raids. If their workplace has been destroyed, then they stop working for a while, often live on their own without relatives, hang around in bunkers and so inevitably join up with similar kinds of people of the same age. This produces a negative selection which gradually forms the core of these groups.

Combating the Gangs

The gang problem prompted the Reich Youth Leadership and the local headquarters of the HJ to initiate major actions against the gangs in cooperation with the Security Police and the judicial authorities. […]

As far as the choice of judicial measures is concerned, briefly it must be said that a distinction should be made between leaders, active participants and finally, passive followers. In minor cases a warning can be issued or youth custody may be sufficient. But one must avoid condemning a large group of young people to youth custody. This simply strengthens their sense of solidarity and binds the young people even more strongly together.

Consignment to a work re-education camp for a period of up to three months will be an appropriate measure in the case of those young people who have not yet committed a criminal act, if there are signs of remorse. In the case of more deeply rooted wildness but without criminal tendencies, assignment to a reformatory will be required. However, it must be emphasized that the leadership of the gangs and the prominent active members can only be educated and prevented from continuing their gang activity by the toughest punishments. Inappropriate mildness is out of place here. In the case of criminal gangs an indeterminate sentence will be an appropriate measure. As a last resort there is consignment to a youth detention center.

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