

The Problems of the Young Generation from the Perspective of an SED Functionary (September 1946)

Abstract

In September 1946, SED youth functionary Paul Verner offered younger Germans a forceful summary of the devastating consequences of World War II and the collapse of the Third Reich – a large percentage of German men between the ages of 20 and 40 were dead, in captivity, or unable to work because of war injuries. Under the difficult postwar conditions, the crime rate rose among teenagers and young adults. After the abuse of youthful enthusiasm by the Nazi regime, young people's interest in politics and social engagement was initially weak. However, Verner saw positive signs of a new youth movement in the anti-Fascist youth committees and in the Free German Youth [*Freie Deutsche Jugend* or FDJ], which was founded in 1946. However, the FDJ was by no means above party politics; instead, it was controlled by the SED and would later hold a virtual monopoly position as the GDR's state youth organization.

Source

[...]

The bulk of youth regards itself as a lost generation, and it began its journey between the two worlds under the worst preconditions imaginable, between the world that has gone under in tears, and the new world that Germans must create through their own power, but whose shape seems to young people – in their bitterness, helplessness, their sense of having been cheated, and in the daily pressure of their social and material conditions – nebulous and a long way off. It is incumbent upon the socialist workers' movement, which has been called forth by the way things have developed, to remake the social conditions of our country from a preeminent position, to solve the problems of the young generation. It must give the youth a new spirit, lead it onto new paths. In that way, it will win over the youth and be able to shape it into a social force of the present and the future.

What, then, is the economic and social situation of the youth?

The Second World War profoundly altered the composition of the population. Where, in a normal population, the age cohorts from 20 to 40 would constitute about 12 million, today there are barely 6 million left. That means a decline by half. Although the return of the prisoners of war to their homeland will increase the able-bodied population, it will not be able to remedy the glaring disproportion. The result of the man-killing war is an absolute decline in the employable male population. On top of this, about a million young men who are either unable to make a living or are severely restricted in their capacities are exacerbating the situation in terms of labor policy. In May 1946, in the state of Saxony, for example, 4,128 of the unemployed men between the ages of 19 and 25 were limited in their ability to work.

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Just as the war and the Hitler period brought misery and disease in their wake, they also brought a slackening of the work ethic and an increase in youth crime. For many, black marketeering it is still more profitable than earning a living through honest work.

That the growth in youth crime is a direct result of the Hitler education and the war requires no proof. It is sufficient to note that in the years of Hitler's rule, the crimes committed by young people increased

year after year. Nazism is, in the final analysis, the reason why we now have a large number of young bandits, black marketeers, and young people of both genders who are running afoul of the law. Fraud, robbery, embezzlement, and black marketeering accounted for the largest share of offenses. Eighty percent of all offenses committed in Berlin by young people are property crimes. Eighty-five percent of the youthful offenders are boys and 15% are girls between the ages of 11 and 21; of those, 40% are between 16 and 18; 25% are between 14 and 16; another 25% are between 18 and 21; and 10% are between 11 and 14 years of age.

Nothing would be more mistaken than to derive from these sober numbers the conclusion that the youth is morally dissolute and to point at the “terrible youth” with a pharisaically-raised finger. Sensationalism and the sinister intentions of reactionary circles are trying to cover up the real causes in order to gain political capital from the situation. Youth crime will decline to the same degree to which conditions in Germany improve.

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If we wish to examine the political and ideological conditions and currents among youth, then we must proceed from the realization that while the young generation may represent a uniform body on the outside, it breaks down internally into various groups. Fairly sharp boundary lines can be drawn between the 14- to 18-year-olds and the 19- to 25-year-olds. And they, in turn, are different from the young people in the older age cohorts. Common to both of the first-named groups is the possession of no other criteria than those of the Hitler period, whereby the 18- to 25-year-olds are still the group of young people who are taking a wait-and-see attitude. “We have burned our fingers enough, just leave us alone!” is an oft-heard refrain. To this group, especially, applies the observation of one foreign journalist who wrote: “Evidently there are very many people in Germany who, when they think of politics, can only think of what the National Socialists turned politics into, something bad that should be rejected. [...] This attitude seems particularly widespread among the young generation, among those who have known only National Socialism and its conceptual world. [...]”

Raised in Nazism, educated in the abominable teachings of Hitler barbarism, unfamiliar with the ideas of other nations – for these young people a world collapsed, a world that made them unstable and mistrustful, skeptical, and partly cynical to the new. This second group, especially, is having a very hard time finding its way. The younger ones are managing more quickly, and they are already developing considerable social activity. That is also reflected in the fact that the large majority of the members of the “Free German Youth” are boys and girls between the ages of fourteen and eighteen.

Since the days of the collapse, a process of political clarification has been occurring among youth, and this has had a very broad and deep effect in the Soviet-occupied zone. Shortly after the creation of the democratic political parties, there arose, within the self-government of the cities and villages, youth committees whose task it was to gather the youth and educate them in the democratic spirit. The significance of the youth committees lay in the fact that they paved the way for youth to create a large, uniform, and non-partisan mass youth organization. The youth committees also gave rise to the activists who are at the head of the organizations of the “Free German Youth” [*Freie Deutsche Jugend* or FDJ] today. The FDJ has existed in the Soviet zone since March 7 [1946]; currently, it includes around 300,000 members in the five states and provinces, and it already plays a considerable social role alongside the parties, unions, and women’s committees. The FDJ is a youth organization whose ranks accommodate all worldviews and confessions, as well as the most diverse strata of youth. After all, one result of the war was the breakdown of a whole host of social barriers. The same major problems confront the workers’ youth, students, the farming youth, and young white-collar workers. Those problems can only be solved together and through joint exertions. That is also why the idea of a united youth organization fell onto fertile ground. And that is why the youth movement is much more progressive in the Soviet-occupied zone than in the Western regions of Germany.

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(Verner was a KPD functionary and a “West emigrant.” In 1946–47, he was a member of the Central Council of the FDJ.)

Source: Paul Verner, “Probleme der jungen Generation”, *Einheit* no. 1 (September 1946), p. 240ff; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, *Das gespaltene Land. Leben in Deutschland 1945–1990. Texte und Dokumente zur Sozialgeschichte*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1993, pp. 126–28.

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