



Hitler Youth

Michael H. Kater

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In modern times, the recruitment of children into a political organization and ideology reached its boldest embodiment in the Hitler Youth, founded in 1933 soon after the Nazi Party assumed power in Germany. Determining that by age ten children's minds could be turned from play to politics, the regime inducted nearly all German juveniles between the ages of ten and eighteen into its state-run organization. The result was a potent tool for bending young minds and hearts to the will of Adolf Hitler.

Baldur von Schirach headed a strict chain of command whose goal was to shift the adolescents' sense of obedience from home and school to the racially defined Volk and the Third Reich. Luring boys and girls into Hitler Youth ranks by offering them status, uniforms, and weekend hikes, the Nazis turned campgrounds into premilitary training sites, air guns into machine guns, sing-alongs into marching drills, instruction into indoctrination, and children into Nazis. A few resisted for personal or political reasons, but the overwhelming majority enlisted.

Drawing on original reports, letters, diaries, and memoirs, Kater traces the history of the Hitler Youth, examining the means, degree, and impact of conversion, and the subsequent fate of young recruits. Millions of Hitler Youth joined the armed forces; thousands gleefully participated in the subjugation of foreign peoples and the obliteration of "racial aliens." Although young, they committed crimes against humanity for which they cannot escape judgment. Their story stands as a harsh reminder of the moral bankruptcy of regimes that make children complicit in crimes of the state.

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