

## C Alternative youth

### Edelweiss Pirates

**SOURCE 14.29** Edelweiss Pirates. The edelweiss flower was chosen as a symbol of resistance to Hitler. The pirates wore the edelweiss as a metal badge on their collars



#### FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 Choose five features of the activities of the alternative youth groups and explain what aspects of Nazi ideology they challenged.
- 2 Why do you think their popularity increased in the later part of the war?
- 3 Why do you think most of the sources on the alternative youth movements come from agents of the Nazi state?

The growing political and ideological bias of the Hitler Youth diminished its attraction for many young people. The Edelweiss Pirates was the name for a loose collection of subgroups. These bands were mainly of boys aged 14–17 but also included a few girls. They could be recognised by their badges, for example the edelweiss or skull and crossbones; and some wore check shirts, dark short trousers, and white socks. They were largely localised groups with their own names, such as the Roving Dudes, Kittelbach Pirates, the Navajos. Membership was mainly rooted in the working class. The earliest recorded groups existed in 1934 and membership has been estimated at 2,000 by 1939. Numbers grew most rapidly during the war years. In 1945, for instance, the Cologne authorities reported twenty groups of around 100 members.

Their aims are not easy to identify. They were partly just rebellious youth trying to escape the intrusive Nazi system, joining in popular pastimes such as weekend camps, hikes and singing songs about sex and food (not Hitler Youth songs!). However, some groups were highly politicised, establishing links with the KPD and beating up Hitler Youth patrols with the slogan 'Eternal War on the Hitler Youth!' In 1942 the Düsseldorf Hitler Youth complained of 'no go' areas. During the Second World War some groups helped escaped prisoners of war and distributed Allied and communist leaflets. Thus their actions ranged from socially nonconformist behaviour to political resistance.

The response of the authorities became harsher over time. They initially issued warnings with some raids and arrests, but in March 1940 130 Navajos in Cologne were arrested. Later, in December 1942, the Gestapo arrested 739 Edelweiss Pirates in Düsseldorf. They had their heads shaven, were detained, or sent for corrective education or to labour camps. Some were tried and executed. In November 1944 the leaders of the Cologne Edelweiss Pirates were hanged.

#### Swing

These groups of mainly upper-middle-class youths, unlike the Edelweiss Pirates, had the wealth to frequent night-clubs. Many were nominally members of the Hitler Youth. Swing groups mainly developed in large cities, such as Hamburg, Berlin, Frankfurt and Dresden, during the late 1930s. They rejected Hitler Youth

**SOURCE 14.30** Edelweiss Pirates' song

*Hark the hearty fellows sing!  
Strum that banjo, pluck that string!  
And the lassies all join in  
We're going to get rid of Hitler,  
And he can't do a thing.*

*We march by banks of Ruhr and Rhine  
And smash the Hitler Youth in twain.  
Our song is freedom, love and life,  
We're Pirates of the Edelweiss.*

*Hitler's power may lay us low,  
And keep us locked in chains,  
But we will smash the chains one day.  
We'll be free again.*

*We've got fists and we can fight  
We've got knives and we'll get them out.  
We want freedom, don't we boys?  
We are the fighting Navajos.*

#### TALKING POINT

Is total youth conformity an impossible task for any regime?

**SOURCE 14.32** In 1942 the Reich youth leadership was driven to declare

*The formation of cliques, i.e. groupings of young people outside the Hitler Youth, was on the increase a few years before the war, and has particularly increased during the war, to such a degree that a serious risk of the political, moral and criminal breakdown of youth must be said to exist.*

#### TALKING POINT

Some German historians have been accused of exaggerating the significance of the Edelweiss Pirates. Why might they have done so?

ideals, but were generally anti-politics. Their approach was to develop a counter identity, expressed through forbidden music. They met in bars, night-clubs and houses and played American Black and Jewish jazz and swing, not the officially sanctioned German folk music. The Nazis felt undermined by their activities and closed the bars and made some arrests. Although only a tiny minority of German youths were connected with the Swing groups, they do illustrate, as with the Pirates, the failure of the regime to dominate youth; and for many they were a heartening illustration of non-conformity.

**SOURCE 14.31** A newspaper report in the *Rheinische Landeszeitung*, February 1936

#### Dangerous Pirate Games

*On 6 October of last year the police authorities ... staged a mass raid on the so-called Wolfsberg near Huel. It had become known that a great number of 'Kittelbach pirates' had undertaken a social trip to the Wolfsberg ... In order to put a stop to their games once and for all, the police patrol of 6 October was made ready. The 80 or so young chaps aged from 16 to 25 who were on the journey were dressed in the typical 'uniform' of the Kittelbach pirates (short summer trousers, white shirt, belt with death's head, death's head ring, lump of porcelain on the trouser buckle, tin whistle in the leg of the boot). They had taken along with them strips of canvas for spending a night in the open, alcohol galore and ... girls ...*

*When the police arrived, they found most of the 'pirates' completely drunk, and the girls in an indescribable state. The whole group (apparently overcome by a false romantic idea of what it is to be an outlaw) was picked up by the police. Perhaps 70 of these wayward young chaps were taken to the law court in Krefeld where they were found guilty of offences against Section 4 of the ORDINANCE of 28 February 1933, wearing a banned uniform. Ten additional ones ... had to appear before the Düsseldorf special court today ...*

*In the main trial, which was conducted 'in camera' [in private], all of the accused (who used nicknames like 'Bobby', 'Jumbo', 'Sonny Boy', 'Black Hand' and the like) admitted their guilt ... 'Black Hand' was sentenced to two months in prison, 'Bobby' to one month. The other pirates each got a 75 Mark fine ... The chairman of the court explained that ... if the accused had been older and had displayed activity which amounted to subversion ... the death penalty, life imprisonment or a long prison sentence would have been expected. The chairman of the special court concluded that this may serve as warning to any other 'members of other special groups'.*

**SOURCE 14.33** The hanging of Edelweiss Pirates in 1944



## D Was Nazi youth policy successful?

It is very hard to judge the extent to which the Nazis succeeded in indoctrinating German youth. You have already encountered evidence that some children reacted against Nazi propaganda, whilst others absorbed it. Clearly a whole range of variables would affect the degree of impact.

### FOCUS ROUTE

1 Read Sources 14.34–39, then copy and complete the chart below.

Responses to Nazi youth policies	Sources you could use	Evidence
Enthusiasm	14.35	
Conformity for career reasons	14.35, 14.37	
Conformity through fear	14.36, 14.38	
Conformity through apathy/natural obedience	14.34	
Nonconformity/disillusion	14.36	
Criticism/opposition	14.36, 14.37, 14.39	

- Do the sources suggest that young people's reactions to the Nazis changed over time?
- Most of these sources come from either the German opposition or the police. How reliable on this topic do you think these two types of source are?
- Write your own judgement on the success of Nazi youth policy. Then compare it with those of the historians quoted in the chapter review (pages 290–1).

**SOURCE 14.34** A German reflects back on his youth in the Third Reich: quoted in D. Peukert, *Life in the Third Reich*, ed. R. Bessel, 1987, p. 27

*No one in our class ever read Mein Kampf. I myself only took quotations from the book. On the whole we didn't know much about Nazi ideology. Even anti-Semitism was brought in rather marginally at school – for example via Richard Wagner's essay 'The Jews in Music' – and outside school the display copies of Der Stürmer made the idea questionable, if anything...*

*Nevertheless, we were politically programmed: to obey orders, to cultivate the soldierly 'virtue' of standing to attention and saying 'Yes, sir', and to stop thinking when the magic word 'Fatherland' was uttered and Germany's honour and greatness were mentioned.*

**SOURCE 14.35** A 1934 report to the Social Democratic Party in exile (SOPADE)

*Youth is still in favour of the system: the novelty, the drill, the uniform, the camp life, the fact that school and the parental home take a back seat compared to the community – all that is marvellous. A great time without any danger. Many believe that they will find job opportunities through the persecution of Jews and Marxists...*

*The new generation has never had much use for education... on the contrary, knowledge is publicly condemned... The children and young people follow the instructions of the HJ and demand from their parents that they become good Nazis... The parents cannot forbid the child to do what all children are doing, cannot refuse him the uniform... The secret of National Socialism is the secret of its youth. The chaps are so fanaticised that they believe in nothing but their Hitler.*

**Source 14.36** From SOPADE reports, 1935

*[Bavaria] The reports dealing with youth and its enthusiasm for the regime are not uniformly in agreement. In as much as most of our colleagues detect tremendous support for the regime among the oncoming generation, some maintain that the sentiments among youth are diverse. It goes without saying that Hitler Youth does its utmost to create enthusiasm, but among working-class youths one can hear much criticism.*

*[Southwestern Germany] To youth in the secondary schools, the continuous force-feeding of National Socialism is having the same effect as the heavy emphasis on religious instruction in earlier decades. National Socialism is no longer a matter of youthful rebellion but has instead become the state-sponsored school curriculum. Consequently National Socialism has lost much of its appeal, especially since the suppression of political opponents and otherwise orientated youth organisations. This is why today the frequent dodging of the Hitler Youth and its events, as well as the transgression [violation] of National Socialist prohibitions, has become a favourite game for youths who eagerly outfox the authorities.*

*[Rhineland–Westphalia] Some of the teachers tried everything in order to force children into the Hitler Youth... Teachers enquire whether or not one's father is a party member or is in the SA... or which newspapers are read at home. Children whose parents are avowed opponents of the Nazis answer yes many times simply because they are afraid.*

*... In the rural areas as well as industrial cities one can see an increasing demoralisation of youth. In rural areas there has been a sharp decline in participation at Hitler Youth events. Many have resigned their membership, and membership dues are frequently unpaid. While at first uniforms and war games were quite appealing, the regimented routine is now regarded as burdensome by children. The power of authority which was bestowed upon some children has given rise to discontent and resistance. It is not unusual for a youthful group leader whose position of authority has gone to his head to receive a beating from his charges because he wanted to drill the already exhausted group even harder...*

**SOURCE 14.37** From a SOPADE report, 1938

*Young people are more easily influenced in terms of mood than are adults. This fact made it easier for the regime to win over young people in the first years after the seizure of power. It appears that the same fact is now making it hard for the regime to keep young people in thrall [submissive]... They were made particularly large promises which for the most part were incapable of fulfilment. The great mass of young people today can see that the well-paying posts in public administration and the Party apparatus have been filled by comrades who had the good fortune of being a few years older... in the long run young people too are feeling increasingly irritated by the lack of freedom and the mindless drilling that is customary in the National Socialist organisations...*

**SOURCE 14.39** The Düsseldorf–Crafenberg branch of the National Socialist Party reported to the Gestapo on 17 July 1943

*The said youths are throwing their weight around again. I have been informed that assemblages of young people have become more conspicuous than ever, especially since the last terror [bombing] raid on Düsseldorf. These youngsters, aged between 12 and 17 hang around into the late evening, with musical instruments and young females. Since this riffraff is to a large extent outside the Hitler Youth and adopts a hostile attitude towards the organisation, they represent a danger to other young people... There is a suspicion that it is these youths who have been inscribing the walls of the pedestrian subway on the Altenbergstrasse with the slogans 'Down with Hitler', 'The OKW is lying', 'Medals for Murder!', 'Down with Nazi brutality', etc. However often these inscriptions are removed, within a few days new ones appear on the walls again.*

**SOURCE 14.38** The title page of *Kamaradschaft* (Comradeship), an underground youth magazine of 1938



## E Review: Did the Nazis succeed in winning the hearts and minds of German youth?

Assessing the effectiveness of propaganda on the young in a totalitarian society is a notoriously difficult task. There is the problem of people at the time being too frightened to put their real views on paper. On the other hand, there is the danger that people recording their oral testimony at a later date exaggerate their degree of opposition to the regime. Furthermore, when we do find opposition from young people, is it really opposition to the regime or simply the normal rebelliousness of youth? Several historians have attempted to assess the overall impact of Nazi policies.

**SOURCE 14.40** G. Mosse, *Nazi Culture*, 1981, p. 265

*It is difficult to say just how successful the Nazi reshaping of education proved to be in practice. It must have varied greatly from school to school and depended a great deal on individual teachers and principals.*

**SOURCE 14.41** A. Wilt, *Nazi Germany*, 1994, p.66

*It has been estimated that as many as 95 per cent of the German youth backed the Nazis, or at least Hitler, and that opposition for the most part remained vague and diffuse.*

**SOURCE 14.42** D. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany. Conformity and Opposition in Everyday Life*, 1987, pp. 152, 173

*The second half of the 1930s reveals a growing crisis in the Hitler Youth, a crisis which during the war years developed into a massive opposition movement on the part of groups and gangs of young people. The SOPADE reports on Germany for 1938 already recorded this radical shift of attitude among the young, from initial attraction to growing rejection.*

*... The two central projects of National Socialist social policy – the nullification [cancelling] of class reality through the sentiment of Volksgemeinschaft; and the mobilisation of the people, militarised and schooled in CHAUVINISM, to smash the perceived threat to traditional influences posed by modernity [current fashion] and internationalism – seem to have miscarried even before the end of the Third Reich loomed into sight in the shape of military defeat.*

**SOURCE 14.43** K. Fischer, *Nazi Germany*, 1995, p. 353

*Nazi educational efforts as a whole turned out to be poorly thought out and lacking in substance. At best, the Nazis put a thin ideological veneer [surface] on German education. It is not surprising that twelve years were not enough to break down 'two thousand years of European cultural heritage'. However, Nazi indoctrination was able to miseducate and misuse a whole generation of young people.*

**SOURCE 14.44** B. Sax, D. Kuntz, *Inside Hitler's Germany*, 1992, p. 308

*Through the training of young men and women, the Nazis procured [acquired] a most impressionable group of individuals on whom to impose their ideas in the hope of creating the new men and women of the Volksgemeinschaft ... What National Socialist training produced, however, were duller and stupider, though healthier, individuals. By the late 1930s, the authorities became increasingly aware of the fact that while students, no longer able to think for themselves, would therefore not resist the regime, they were incapable of either providing political leadership in the future or contributing the intellectual and technical skills necessary for running a modern industrial society. They proved to be the most willing to sacrifice themselves to the principles of National Socialism.*

**SOURCE 14.45** M. Housden, in *Resistance and Conformity in the Third Reich*, 1997, p. 81, summarises reasons for the support for Nazism

*There were all manner of reasons for youngsters to support the Third Reich. [1] National Socialism provided a vehicle for conflict between generations. [2] It could be dynamic, exciting and purposeful. [3] Youngsters were socialised into National Socialist ways at school and [4] in the Hitler Youth. [5] When all else failed they could be intimidated. What is more, the longer the Nazi system was in place, the more hazy became the memories of younger Germans of the days before Hitler. Eventually youngsters knew no alternative. And yet, despite all this, support for Hitler was less than total.*

### ACTIVITY

- 1 a) Explain the limited success of Nazi education. Refer, with supporting evidence, to the following:
  - Nazi ideas on the aims of education
  - the complex institutional structure
  - the reactions of teachers, parents and students
  - the length of time the Nazis held power.
- b) Why are there problems in both finding and assessing the evidence for this question?
- 2 Find evidence to support all the statements we have numbered in Source 14.45.
- 3 'Natural youth behaviour' or 'political opposition'. Which is the more appropriate description of groups like the Edelweiss Pirates?
- 4 Now use your Focus Route answers (see page 277) to do your essay.

### KEY POINTS FROM CHAPTER 14: Did the Nazis succeed in winning the hearts and minds of German youth?

- 1 The Nazis sought to indoctrinate the young from the age of four, using youth movements and the school system to impose their values.
- 2 The Nazis scorned intellectual learning and placed emphasis on physical strength and obedience.
- 3 Millions joined the Hitler Youth, initially attracted by adventurous activities. Pressure to join increased, and in 1936 membership was made compulsory.
- 4 There is evidence of increasing disillusion with aspects of the Nazi youth movements as the years passed.
- 5 During the war, organised groups of young people directly challenged Nazi orthodoxy, despite the danger of getting caught.
- 6 There was no major reorganisation of schools, except for a decline in denominational schools and the creation of a few elite schools.
- 7 The government attempted indoctrination via control of the curriculum and teachers.
- 8 Many parents disliked the Nazi training but felt it safer outwardly to conform.
- 9 One effect of the Nazi changes was to reduce the academic quality of the students.
- 10 There is mixed evidence as to the overall effectiveness of Nazi propaganda on German youth.