

## H. W. KOCH'S *THE HITLER YOUTH*

Koch, H. W. *The Hitler Youth: Origins and Development 1922-1945*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975; rpt. ed., New York: Cooper Square, 2000. 348 pages with thirty-nine illustrations, glossary and abbreviations, diagrams, bibliography, and index.

At publication, Koch was a lecturer at the University of York and a visiting professor at the *Hochschule fuer Politik* in Munich. Born in Munich, he briefly served in the Hitler Youth. He also authored *In the Name of the Volk: Political Justice in Hitler's Germany* (New York, 1989).

### Outline:

1. Traditions. German youth in the early twentieth century inherited a century-old tradition of “political activism, an unquenched desire for a political unity that was not artificially created but that would be the product of organic growth in the form of the *Volk*, radiating the spirit of German *Kultur*, the true German *Volksgeist*, a *Volk* which in its institution would reflect not the divisive class characteristics of a society, but the integrating forces of a national community. The ideas making up this tradition developed in the course of time into an ideological bondage . . .” (16).
2. Beginnings. The bright prospects of the young German legions that marched off to battle in August 1914, their pursuit of a dream, were dashed by the graveyard of Langemarck. The naive idealism and nationalism of the new generation failed to overthrow “the old forces of materialism and international capitalism” (33). Instead of a new age, a world of discord and division was born, out of which came a new type of youthfulness—broken, damaged, listless.
3. Re-formation. The Weimar Republic failed to pick up the pieces and provide for any cohesion among youth. “By comparison with the decade prior to 1914, the picture represented by the German youth leagues is too confusing, contradictory, and even bizarre to allow generalizations” (39). As the KPD (Communists) and the SPD (Socialists) vied for the hearts of youth, the DAP and the NSDAP (National Socialists), although early on no more than a Bavarian phenomenon, began to appeal to youth.
4. Birth. Under Kurt Gruber’s able leadership, the *Hitler-Jugend* (HJ) achieved national status in the Nazi party and even incorporated young girls in the *Bund Deutscher Maedel*. As the HJ grew in importance for the Nazi movement, ambitious and unscrupulous power-grabbers like Baldur von Schirach interfered and effected the shape of the organization. By Fall 1931, the organization fell under the auspices of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA).

5. Dominance. Like other Nazi organizations under the process of *Gleichschaltung*, HJ tentacles reached out to take in other German youth leagues. By 1939, “the Hitler Youth had completed the Trinity–*Hitlerjugend*–*Reichsarbeitsdienst*–*Wehrmacht*–which would process every young German from his tenth birthday onwards” (115).

6. Ideology. “The one constant ‘ideological element’ of the Hitler Youth and Hitler Youth training was the blind belief in Adolf Hitler, which in Schirach’s pronouncements often bordered on blasphemy, when Hitler was presented as the God of the Germans” (129). The totalitarian Nazi state managed “to penetrate the innermost recesses of every individual’s life, making every single action, private or public, subject to judgment according to the criteria of National Socialist ideology” (131).

7. Literature. The Nazi control of youth reading and their literature followed “a popular nationalistic literary tradition . . . which since 1871 had been at work instilling in Germany’s youth a spirit of superiority and militant aggressiveness” (161).

8. Education. Based upon Hitler’s own pedagogical ideas, which he summarized in *Mein Kampf*, youth education emphasized physical fitness and character training. Intellectual development focused on German heritage and national community and “the history of the NSDAP, with a strong mixture of National Socialist hero-worship and mythology” (173). A systematic purge of the entire teaching profession occurred, and schools assumed quasi-militaristic, or even outright military, functions.

9. Elites. “As in all authoritarian and totalitarian states . . . a political, military, economic, and administrative elite was required for the continuance and expansion of the National Socialist regime, an elite which by the very nature of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* had to be trained from childhood” (179). The Nazis accomplished this through a three-tiered system of the parental home, school, and the Hitler Youth. Special schools provided training for youth who could meet rigid entrance criteria.

10. Dissent. Before 1933, dissent from HJ surfaced as “disagreements between individuals or between other youth groups and the Hitler Youth. After 1933, . . . any dissent expressed in public was by definition dissent against the state of Adolf Hitler” (204). Basically, dissent under the Third Reich was limited, local, and overall ineffective.

11. War. HJ were prepared to serve Germany’s war needs and became involved in numerous aspects of the war effort. After September 1939, “the para-military training of the Hitler Youth intensified” (236). German girls actively assisted in the resettlement villages, and German boys served in “a special division of the Hitler Youth within the *Waffen-SS* . . . the 12<sup>th</sup> *SS-Panzer Division Hitlerjugend*” (244). “Already in peace-time they were far removed from those still

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educated in the old traditions, from parents, educators, clergymen, and humanistic circles. With their sights set they [were] well equipped for the task of deliberately destroying part of the globe in the name of the Aryan mission” (239).

12. Aftermath. Koch questions whether or not the ideological bondage of Germany’s youth really ended with the defeat of National Socialism in World War II.

Analysis:

Hannsjoachim Wolfgang Koch’s study, *The Hitler Youth*, centers on the association’s origins and evolution for about two decades, from 1922 to 1945. But Koch incorporates the larger perspective, as he situates the development of the *Hitler-Jugend* (HJ)—its aspirations, orientation, and accomplishments—in the context of “traditions” or ideologies that spread among Germany’s youth in the early nineteenth century and lingered well past the conclusion of World War II in the twentieth century, even into the 1970s. For this reason, Koch has written more than a summary history of HJ; he has contributed notably to generation studies—*typisch Volkscharakter aus Jugendliche Studien*—that concentrate on ideology instead of psychology for causal analysis.

Augmented by his own experience in the HJ, Koch’s study began with an investigation of the romantic philosophy of the leading literary critic of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). This proved to be “both enlightening and depressing, for it revealed how Herder’s concept of the *Volk*, which offered an alternative approach to popular democracy from that provided by ‘the ideas of the French Revolution’, changed—in fact mutated—year by year and decade by decade until it became one of the component strands of National Socialism” (preface).

On this basis, Koch intended originally to title his book “Youth in Bondage,” since he had come to believe that “it ultimately required the cataclysm of the Second World War to break Germans, and especially Germany’s youth, from what was the last and strongest perversion of the concept of the *Volk*,” and he even doubted whether the downfall of National Socialism “liberated German youth in general from [its] ideological shackles” (ibid.). But he settled on the simple title “Hitler Youth” to concede the fact that his history of HJ was far from “definitive” but still “a fairly coherent outline” (ibid.).

This descriptive account of youth in bondage in a society held captive to a false ideology is, then, Koch’s main thesis. He really does not argue the point but rather asserts it as an overall frame of reference for his discussion of the HJ. Thus, he reasons in his concluding remarks:

Nietzsche once asserted that it is the fate of youth to deliver the final blow to a pseudo-culture that is in the process of collapse. . . . What seems clear though is that the ties that held most of Germany’s youth in bondage for a century and a half have been completely destroyed but in the process of destruction have been replaced by others.

. . . But then bondage is an unalterable condition, a fact of life. . . . Man in bondage—a bondage of one kind or another—is as natural as it would be unnatural for youth not to question the validity of this condition, or in fact rebel against it and to fashion and follow its own ideals. In the past youth has succeeded at times in changing and ameliorating this condition—not, however, in abolishing it. But never, in German history at least, has there been a time in which German youth paid a higher price for such an attempt, a price of personal sacrifice and physical as well as mental injuries sustained, than in the era dominated by the symbol of the rune and the swastika (265-266).

In Koch’s judgment, the catastrophe of National Socialism’s manipulation of Germany’s youth precludes formal argument, since the facts themselves illustrate the point all too well. But Koch purposely omits extensive comparison of the Hitler Youth with “the entire complex of the *Buendische Jugend*” and thereby neglects a significant body of evidence for his generalization of

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the Third Reich's young citizens (see his preface). Regardless, Koch succeeds admirably, as he exposes the destructive nature of the *Volksgeist* that the Nazis prescribed for Germany's children.

Koch adroitly masters his subject from the perspective of various types of history. For example, he uses intellectual history for the beginnings of HJ and its ideology; he applies political history to youth re-formation in Nazi Germany, the birth and dominance of HJ, and its dissenters; he relies on cultural history to discuss the organization's literature, education, and elites; and he takes a look at HJ's role in World War II with military history. Obviously, this method suffers from the problem of a shifting perspective, but it enjoys the benefit of a rich, kaleidoscopic portrayal of HJ. Furthermore, his thematic approach eschews strict chronology, except in some chapter development. But this repetition forces the reader to rethink the evolution of HJ from alternative viewpoints.

According to Koch, the Nazi's skewed thinking derived not from nihilistic despair but from Germany's persistent tradition of nationalistic romanticism. This, along with pragmatic aspects of the *Wandervogel* movement, had influenced a *Jugendkultur* of confident idealism among German youth by the early twentieth century. By the 1920s, the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei* (NSDAP) slowly but steadily assimilated this youth culture under its *Sturmabteilung* (SA) in both the Youth League of the NSDAP and the *Jungsturm Adolf Hitler*. In July 1926, re-formation as *Hitler-Jugend, Bund der deutschen Arbeiterjugend*, with Kurt Gruber as its *Reichsfuehrung*, assured the HJ a certain independence but not without the party's frequent bureaucratic intrusions.

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In April 1931, Hitler once again subordinated HJ to the SA and its Chief of Staff, Ernst Roehm, and in October 1931, HJ got a new *Reichsjugendfuhrer* as well—Baldur von Schirach. By Spring 1933, the Reich's *Gleichschaltung* correlated HJ's objectives: "to eliminate—with the exception of the Catholic Youth Movement—all other competing youth leagues and youth organizations . . . to assume as many functions of youth work as possible . . . to draw as many age groups as possible into the various organizations of the Hitler Youth" (97). True, this part of Koch's book reads like a history of the NSDAP's political intrigues and internal machinations, with HJ relegated to a subsidiary but parallel role. But such highlights the reality of HJ as little more than an organic extension of the party itself and its control by the party apparatus.

More characteristic of what HJ members themselves immediately experienced is Koch's summary of HJ's official publications as well as its condemned and accepted books (for example, Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Ernst Juenger's *Storms of Steel*, respectively), the propagandistic educational institutions (the *Nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalt* and the *Adolf Hitler Schools*), and, to a lesser extent, the training of Nazi elites (in the *Ordensburgen* and the party's *Hohe Schule*). Here, Koch expands his source material to include journal and newspaper accounts, personal testimony, and primary documents from Nazi notables in addition to his plentiful compilation of data from official party documents and later interpretive works. But his failure to include a larger quantity of archival material (i.e., oral testimony, personal letters) is compensated by his intimate knowledge of HJ and his generous use of anecdotes, poems, quotes, and stories. His biographical sketches (i.e., the youth of

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Langemarck, Herbert Norkus, the war youth, and the dissenters) also bring verisimilitude and realism to his narrative.

Koch admittedly weighs his evidence with considerable care, especially in the case of statistical data (or the lack thereof). On several occasions, he refuses to give a judgment on the basis of skimpy, inconclusive, or non-existent evidence. But he seldom dismisses an opportunity to voice his opinion or redefine the significance of the facts that are or can be known. This gives a reasonableness to *The Hitler Youth* that would hardly be expected from an affected eyewitness. In this light, Koch's work holds true to his major contention that Nazi heavy-handedness prejudiced Germany's youth away from any other influence and socialized them by means of a romanticized and racist nationalism toward an ultimately futile warlikeness. Koch's *Hitler Youth* relates superbly this historic and disturbing bondage of German youth.