

# **The Bund Deutscher Mädel and the Indoctrination of the German Girl**

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## **ABSTRACT**

As the Nazi government took hold, one of the key elements to retaining their power was influencing the younger generations to perpetuate the party ideology—nationalism, patriotism, and Aryan pride. Outside of the family, this was accomplished by the Hitler Youth, divided into two gender-specific organizations, the Hitlerjugend for boys and the Bund Deutscher Mädel (BDM) for girls. From the ages of 10 to 21, young women were programmed to be the perfect Nazi bride, concerned only with Kinder, Küche, and Kirch (children, kitchen, and church). The BDM used a combination of physical activities and social conditioning to train these young women to raise future generations of the Reich.

**Keywords:** Propaganda, Nazis, Indoctrination, *Glaube und Schönheit* (Faith and Beauty Society), *Bund Deutscher Mädel*, Hitler Youth, Elvira Bauer, *Landfrauenjahr* (Year of Land Service)

# **El Bund Deutscher Mädel y el adoctrinamiento de la niña alemana**

## **RESUMEN**

A medida que el gobierno nazi se afianzaba, uno de los elementos clave para retener su poder fue influir en las generaciones más jóvenes para perpetuar la ideología del partido: el nacionalismo, el patriotismo y el orgullo ario. Fuera de la familia, esto fue logrado por las Juventudes Hitlerianas, divididas en dos organizaciones específicas de género, Hitlerjugend para niños y Bund Deutscher Mädel (BDM) para niñas. Desde los 10 hasta los 21 años, las mujeres jóvenes fueron programadas para ser la novia nazi perfecta, preocupadas solo por Kinder, Küche y Kirch (niños, cocina e iglesia). El BDM utilizó una combinación de actividades físicas y acondicionamiento social para capacitar a estas jóvenes para criar a las generaciones futuras del Reich.

**Palabras clave:** Propaganda, Nazis, Adoctrinamiento, *Glaube und Schönheit* (Sociedad de Fe y Belleza), *Bund Deutscher Mädel*, Juventudes Hitlerianas, Elvira Bauer, *Landfrauenjahr* (Año del Servicio Terrestre)

## 德国少女联盟和及其思想灌输

### 摘要

随着纳粹政府掌权，保持其权力的关键之一则是影响年轻一代，进而延续党派意识形态—民族主义、爱国主义和雅利安人的骄傲。这发生在家庭之外，由希特勒青年团完成，后者被划分为两个性别组织—男孩加入希特勒青年团，女孩加入德国少女联盟（BDM）。10-21岁的少女被设定成为完美的纳粹新娘，她们只关心孩子、厨房和教堂。BDM通过体力活动和社会熏陶来训练这些少女为纳粹德国养育后代。

关键词：政治宣传，纳粹，思想灌输，“信仰与美丽”组织，德国少女联盟，希特勒青年团，埃尔维拉·鲍尔（Elvira Bauer），一年土地劳动（Landfrauenjahr）

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As the 1930s progressed, Hitler youth organizations developed into the largest single purpose organization within the Nazi party.<sup>1</sup> Youths and young adults between the ages of 10 and 18 spent their free time organized social gatherings with an emphasis on spreading the National Socialist agenda. In the early days of the *Bund Deutscher Mädel*, the League of German Girls, the girls would participate in similar activities as the boys leagues—war games, field exercises, and marksmanship.<sup>2</sup> This proved to be wildly unsuccessful in terms of recruitment, and towards the end of the de-

cade the BDM became more focused on turning young women into ideal Nazi housewives.<sup>3</sup> While the Hitler Youth programs were instrumental in the indoctrination of both young women and men, there remains a woefully limited amount of English literature regarding the BDM, and many of the writings on the organization are filled with exaggeration in terms of the size of the organization.<sup>4</sup>

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the Hitler-Jugend, and specifically the role that the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* played in solidifying the support for Hitler and the party

for the younger generations of women. The group's origins stem from the early years of Hitler's attempt at power in the 1920s as a social organization for young women, giving them opportunities to discuss and expose themselves to the rhetoric of the party—nationalism, patriotism, and the superiority of the Aryan race. Before Hitler gained control of the Reichstag in 1932, membership in the organization was optional; afterwards, it became compulsory.

The League was not simply a social organization, though many activities that the young women participated in were social in nature—it was an indoctrination machine. Joseph Goebbels and his propaganda machine understood the importance of controlling the narrative—especially with the youth, to ensure that the message of Nazi superiority was driven home. The Ministry of Propaganda exploited the fact that the brain does not fully develop until the age of 25, leaving the young women of the BDM vulnerable at the hands of the adults who were ultimately supposed to be their protectors.

The conditioning of children started young, typically around the age that they could read. One of the Nazi party's favorite children's books, *Traue keinem Fuchs auf grüner Heid und keinem Jud auf seinem Eid* (Trust No Fox on His Green Heath and No Jew on His Oath) was written by Elvira Bauer, who was a schoolteacher for young children, in 1936. The primary goal of that book (and others) was to spread anti-Semitic sentiment amongst children. The plan was insidious and ef-

fective. Along with Bauer's work, the youth of the nation were repeatedly exposed to anti-Semitic books like "The Poisonous Mushroom" as well as vile and inhumane toys and games.<sup>5</sup> The hate, anti-Semitism, and obedience that formed the core of the Nazi's indoctrination was intentionally directed at the ones who were the most vulnerable.<sup>6</sup> Goebbels and Hitler understood the vulnerability of the youth, the party made membership in the Hitler Youth mandatory in 1939.<sup>7</sup> These tactics were taken a step further once these young women moved from the school yards into the ranks of the BDM.

It is important to note just how limited the study of the Bund Deutscher Mädel has been over the past 80 years. Discussion of the BDM was typically done as a side examination or an offshoot in the discussion of the Hitler Youth in general. The reasons behind that were widely varied, including but not limited to the lack of access to primary sources until the reunification of Germany in 1990 and an overall lack of interest in the involvement of young girls in the Nazi movement. This harkens back to the amount of astonishment that the outside world had when finding out just what percentage of women voted for Hitler in spite of his apparent misogynistic values.

The overwhelming majority of the young women who joined the BDM before it became compulsory were either true believers themselves, or the daughters of true believers. These young women wanted to matter to the Party, to the Volk, and to the Vaterland.

Just like every other teenage girl, they wanted to be a part of something great, something that mattered.<sup>8</sup> They fell victim to Hitler's honey-coated promises of a revitalized, lavish, and prosperous Germany, with the economic and political power that it had before the defeat in 1918.<sup>9</sup> Too young to work and too old to play, these girls were nothing more than empty vessels waiting to be filled with the party line.

The party leaders utilized physical, emotional, and psychological manipulation to wear down these girls and further indoctrinate them into the Nazi way of life. The goal began with creating a new, Nazi femininity—a sharp contrast to how the Weimar woman were perceived—the Nazi woman was simple, restrained, and knew her place in society, subjugated first to her father and then her husband. Gone was the cosmopolitan woman of the Weimar who drank, smoked, painted her face, and dressed in the style of the French. German women were to be subdued in their beauty, with simple clothes and humble plaits, the human embodiment of Nordic simplicity.<sup>10</sup> These dictates were especially obvious in the uniform of the BDM—a shapeless white shirt, simple tie, and navy skirt that hit below the knee.<sup>11</sup> By creating an environment of *Gleichschaltung*, or forced uniformity, the BDM and the party stripped away the individual identities of these young women.<sup>12</sup> This left them pliable, and as evident in other incidents of brainwashing and indoctrination since, such as the Branch Davidians in 1993, created a mindset that enabled them to comfortably commit and support the

atrocities that the Nazi party would undertake over the subsequent six years.

Once the BDM took away their individuality by forcing a uniformity of appearance, they started to work on the physical indoctrination. The main group activities for the BDM included hiking and other organized sports, outwardly to stress physical fitness amongst the members. On the surface, those motivations seemed genuine, but that genuineness was shallow. In forcing the body into a constant state of high adrenaline, the mind becomes even more susceptible to influence.<sup>13</sup> The more physical exertion that these young women underwent, along with the limited access to food due to the economic state of the nation, the easier they were to indoctrinate and control.

The emotional manipulation was going on the whole time. It was nefarious and systemic throughout Germany during Hitler's time in power. From teaching children to hate Jews with the books geared to young readers to the somber pomp of a Hitler speech, the party worked very hard to condition the German youth to support the policies of the Reich. Upon seizing control of the media, the Nazis mass produced their message of racial superiority in sequentially more obvious ways, not the least of which was the poster depicting a young girl, dressed in BDM uniform emblazed with the phrase, "*Auch Du gehörst dem Führer* (You too belong to the Führer)."<sup>14</sup>

When examining the overall structure of the BDM, one finds that it closely resembled a paramilitary or-



*You too belong to the Führer.* 1937. Image. Accessed July 19, 2021. <https://www.ushmm.org/propaganda/archive/poster-you-belong-fuhrer/>. Bundesarchiv Koblenz (Plak 003-011-009)



Young Girls Saluting. Photograph. *The New Yorker*. May 29, 2013. Accessed July 19, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/i-was-a-nazi-and-heres-why>.

ganization. The physical activities and training, even the shooting competitions that these teens would participate in, reinforced the rabid nationalism that these girls were getting from the propaganda. The regimented design of the organization helped further the militarization. In 1933, with a membership of 375,000, the structure included individual groups of fifteen, which each had a troop leader who reported to her higherups, all the way up to the *Reichsregerentin des Bundes Deutscher Mädel* (Reich representative of the League of German Girls).<sup>14</sup> With compulsory membership in 1939, suitable mid-level leadership in rural areas became a problem. The requirements required leaders to be close in age to the troop members, but not enough new adult women were available to step into the role, so party had to rely on women who were themselves not fully homogenized into Reich politics. This was especially true

in more rural areas, where women filled the more traditional roles of wife and mother rather than the more radicalized women in the urban areas.<sup>15</sup>

As the League became less of a revolutionary construct and more of a social training organization, Hitler wrested full control by declaring himself dictator. The BDM's focus moved toward creating ideal Nazi wives and mothers. The activities changed—rather than having the girls physically training with airsoft rifles, they worked on calisthenics to prepare them for the physical rigors of pregnancy and childrearing. They were still required to be physically active, since being unable to run, jump, and throw meant that the girl was of substandard body and ill fit for motherhood. Instead, they focused their training on being adept at the womanly virtues of keeping house, cooking, and childrearing.<sup>16</sup>

Once the girls started to age out of the program, between the ages of 17 and 18—this was before the *Glaube und Schönheit* (Faith and Beauty Society) was formed in 1938—these young women were required to undergo a year of service work for the nation. This was mandated of both groups of the Hitler Youth, male and female.<sup>17</sup> For the girls, this year was typically served either on a farm, where they lived in Spartan barracks and worked the land to pay for their room and board, as well as a pittance of spending money, or they worked in domestic roles, serving as housekeepers or nannies for a young married couple in a larger city. The purpose of this year of work was twofold: the first was to help bolster the economy, and the second was to keep women out of the universities. According to numbers from the Reich statistical office, between 1938 and 1939 the number of young women registered for their *Pflichtjahr* (the official name for the year of duty) increased from under 80,000 to almost 220,000.<sup>18</sup> The program was ultimately less than successful, as the leadership shortage within the BDM created a power vacuum in the middle levels of the organization—the faster the organization grew, the fewer people who were capable of leading the smaller units there were—and from a finance standpoint, it became impossible to support the girls during their service year.<sup>19</sup>

An unintended consequence of the BDM was an increase of promiscuity amongst teens and young women. During the Weimar era, the population of Germany stagnated slightly. Birth rates peaked in the 1870s after the first

unification of Germany under the Empire. They fell significantly during the First World War and afterwards under the Weimar Republic—from 5.35 births per 1,000 in 1875 down to 1.75 in 1935 at the height of Nazi power.<sup>20</sup> This posed a big problem for Hitler and his ilk. How can one lead the thousand-year Reich if the population of the country is on a decline? The reasons for the decline were widespread, including the industrialization of Germany as a nation, which decreased the need for child farm labor, and families moving from farms into cities where the living spaces were smaller and better suited for small family groups. Hitler and the Nazis also feared the ready availability of birth control amongst Weimar women.<sup>21</sup> The Nazis were not the only group concerned with the falling birthrate—it troubled even the feminists of the period.<sup>22</sup> Promiscuity amongst the BDM was such a rampant concern that the League gained the nickname “League of German Mattresses.” While counterintuitive, the Party encouraged this behavior through the Lebensborn. The end goal was to rebuild the German population and correct the declining birthrates—to do that, young women were encouraged to engage in premarital sex and keep the children that were the result.

As the conflict grew, less political energy was spent on the BDM and the indoctrination of young women. The programs still ran, and membership remained compulsory until Germany's surrender in 1945, but the zeal was not the same. By the early part of the 1940s, many of the young women who had



joined the BDM had either aged out of disillusioned with what the BDM had the program or had become completely become.

## Notes

- 1 Dagmar Reese, *Growing up Female in Nazi Germany*, trans. William Templer (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2006), 1-2.
- 2 Ibid., 4.
- 3 Andrew Rowson, *The Third Reich 1919-1939* (Cheltenham, UK: The History Press, 2010), 209.
- 4 Claudia Koonz, "Nazi Women before 1933: Rebels against Emancipation," *Social Science Quarterly* 56, no. 4: 555, accessed February 24, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42860410>.
- 5 Menachem Wecker, "How the Nazis 'Normalized' Anti-Semitism by Appealing to Children," *Smithsonian*, June 27, 2016, accessed July 11, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-nazi-normalized-anti-semitism-appealing-children-180959539/>.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Jill Stephenson, *Hitler's Home Front* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 103.
- 8 Paul Roland, *Nazi Women of the Third Reich* (London: Sirius, 2018), 184.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ute Frevert, *Women in German History*, trans. Stuart McKinnon-Evans (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 211.
- 11 Steven Luckert and Susan Bachrach, *State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Museum, 2011), 80.
- 12 Frevert, *Women in German*, 212
- 13 Rui Xu et al., "How Physical Activities Affect Mental Fatigue Based on EEG Energy, Connectivity, and Complexity," *Frontiers in Neurology*, last modified October 31, 2018, accessed July 13, 2021, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6220083/>.
- 14 Luckert and Bachrach, *State of Deception*, 81
- 15 Stephenson, *Women in Nazi*, 77.
- 16 Frevert, *Women in German*, 212.
- 17 Reese, *Growing Up Female*, 4.



- 18 Matthew Stibbe, *Women in the Third Reich* (London: Hodder Education, 2003), 91.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Spending on the War effort took priority after the invasion of Poland. Rather than expend money on the labor force of young women, the Reich felt those funds could be spent better on munitions and men. See also the *Bundesarchiv* Berlin for pre and post war spending in the BDM.
- 21 Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung, 2011.
- 22 Frevert, *Women in German*, 186.
- 23 Vandana Joshi, "Maternalism, Race, Class and Citizenship: Aspects of Illegitimate Motherhood in Nazi Germany," *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 4 (October 2011): 837, accessed July 15, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41305361>.

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