

**Hitler Youth** was an organization formed by Germany's Nazi Party (the National Socialist German Workers' Party) in 1922. The organization trained and educated boys from the ages of 14 to 18 to become loyal followers of the Nazi Party, as well as future members of the German military. The organization got the name Hitler Youth—*Hitlerjugend* in German—in 1926. It was named for the Nazi leader Adolf Hitler.

The Hitler Youth wore uniforms of brown shirts, black shorts or trousers, and red and white armbands with the Nazi swastika emblem. The Hitler Youth promoted the Nazi teachings of extreme nationalism and *anti-Semitism* (prejudice against Jews). The organization emphasized physical fitness and taught that weakness was to be eliminated. The program instructed the children to spy on their own families and to report any anti-Nazi criticism to the authorities.

Baldur von Schirach, a loyal follower of Adolf Hitler's, oversaw the Hitler Youth and other Nazi youth movements. The other movements included the Society of German Maidens (*Bund deutscher Mädel*), for girls aged 14 to 18. From the ages of 10 to 14, boys belonged to the German Young People (*Deutsches Jungvolk*). Schirach wrote poems and songs for the children to repeat.

The children of the Nazi youth movements recorded their progress in performance booklets. Nearly every activity became an individual, team, or unit competition. Activities included boys' and girls' sports; singing; Nazi marches; hiking and camping; and collecting materials—such as scrap metal, rubber, and paper—for the Nazi cause. The boys were given military instruction in the use of weapons, map reading, marching, and the digging and use of trenches and dugouts.

The Hitler Youth grew rapidly in the 1930's. By 1933, more than 100,000 German boys took part in the movement. In 1936 and again in 1939, the German government passed laws requiring all German children to join the Nazi youth groups. When Hitler's armies invaded Poland at the start of World War II (1939-1945), the Hitler Youth totaled about 8 million members.

Throughout World War II, Nazi Germany used the Hitler Youth increasingly in combat situations. Starting in 1943, the boys—and even some girls—manned antiaircraft guns, served as messengers, and operated searchlights. As the war dragged on and Germany faced a troop

shortage, the boy soldiers were thrown into front-line combat. In some units, the enthusiasm and inexperience of the young soldiers resulted in casualty rates of more than 90 percent. In late April 1945, the Nazis, facing certain defeat, sent about 5,000 boys—many younger than 14—into action against Soviet forces at Berlin, Germany's capital. Within days, most of the children were killed or wounded. Germany surrendered on May 7.

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