

READING

Models of Obedience

For many young people in Nazi Germany, membership in groups like the Hitler Youth offered a feeling of excitement, belonging, and even power, and they participated with enthusiasm. Obedience, conformity, and the desire to please parents, teachers, and group leaders also influenced young people's choices. Hede von Nagel grew up in Nazi Germany. She wrote of her childhood:

As my parents' second daughter, I was a great disappointment to my father, who wanted to produce sons for the Führer and the nation—and, because he was of the nobility, to carry on the family name.

He was furious that, unlike my fair-haired older sister, who looked so Nordic, I had been cursed with auburn hair and dark brown eyes. Then came a third child, this time a male, but he was a dark-eyed redhead—another let down for my patriotic father. Only when another son was born and proved to be the very model of a tow-headed, blue-eyed Aryan was my father satisfied. "At last," he said, "the child I wanted."

Our parents taught us to raise our arms and say "Heil Hitler" before we said "Mama." This type of indoctrination was universal. Children experienced it in kindergarten, at home—everywhere. We grew up believing that Hitler was a super-god, and Germany an anointed nation. . . .

At the same time, our parents and teachers trained my sister and me to be the unquestioning helpmates of men; as individuals, we had no right to our own opinion, no right to speak up.¹

A former member of the Hitler Youth had similar memories:

[It's] especially easy to manipulate children at that age. . . . If you can drill the notion into their heads, you are from a tribe, a race that is especially valuable. And then you tell them something about the Germanic tribes, their loyalty, their battles, how Germanic women let themselves be hitched up to carts to fight against the Romans. . . . Then there were the songs. . . "Before the foreigner robs you of your crown, O Germany, we would prefer to

¹ Hede von Nagel, "The Nazi Legacy—Fearful Silence for Their Children," Boston Globe, October 23, 1977.

fall side by side." Or "The flag is dearer than death." . . . The flag, the people—they were everything. You are nothing, your people everything. Yes, that's how children were brought up, that's how you can manipulate a child.²

Alfons Heck believed there was more to it than propaganda:

Traditionally, the German people were subservient to authority and respected their rulers as exalted father figures who could be relied on to look after them. A major reason why the Weimar Republic, despite its liberal constitution, did not catch on with many Germans was the widespread impression that no one seemed to be firmly in charge. Hitler used that yearning for a leader brilliantly. From our very first day in the *Jungvolk*, we accepted it as a natural law—especially since it was merely an extension of what we had learned in school—that a leader's orders must be obeyed unconditionally, even if they appeared harsh, punitive, or unsound. It was the only way to avoid chaos. This chain of command started at the very bottom and ended with Hitler.

I still recall with wonder that [our leader] once marched all 160 of us in his *Fahnlein* [unit] into an ice-cold river in November because our singing had displeased him. We cursed him bitterly under our breath, but not one of us refused. That would have been the unthinkable crime of disobeying a "direct order." During the war, such a refusal could be used—and frequently was—to put the offender before a firing squad.³

² Quoted in Dan Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence: Encounters with Children of the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 216.

³ Alfons Heck, *A Child of Hitler: Germany in the Days When God Wore a Swastika* (Phoenix, AZ: Renaissance House, 1985), 33–34.

Connection Questions

1. How did each of the Germans quoted in this reading believe they acquired their attitudes and values? How do you think you acquired yours?
2. How did each of these Germans explain what the role was of obedience and conformity in Nazi Germany?
3. Why is it important that a child be taught to obey? At what point does obedience become dangerous? What is the difference between obedience and conformity?
4. All three sources are written by adults looking back on their youth in Nazi Germany. How might hindsight affect their feelings about their participation?
5. According to Alfons Heck, why might a strong leader have been attractive to Germans in the 1930s? What evidence have you found while studying this history that some Germans either tolerated or welcomed a strong governmental authority figure?