

Perpetrators or Victims? Understanding the Hitler Youth generation

Contemporary History Workshop 24.2.2015

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SPEAKER NOTES

Thank you everyone for coming here today for my presentation. Hopefully this will lead to a good discussion afterwards, as I want to develop many of these points further. Before we begin, I would like to clarify a few terms. When talking about the “Hitler Youth Generation” we mean those who were born c. 1925-1933, and are often in historiography called the 1929ers. The Hitler Youth, as an organization, was divided between boys and girls (Boys: Jungvolk (10-14 yo); Hitler Youth (14-18); Girls: Jungmädel (10-14), Bund Deutscher Mädel (14-18)) On this next slide, is my proposed chapter outline of my PhD up to this point, subject to change of course

The first part of this paper has a more theoretical focus: I will first talk about the meaning of the word “memoir” in conjunction with “autobiography”, briefly discuss the “memory boom” of the 20th century, and lastly, discuss the polemics of “collective memory.” My second part focuses on the Hitler Youth Generation and the memoirs that many wrote. Lastly, I will talk very briefly about the discussion surrounding famous HY memoirs in Germany.

Perhaps some of you, like me, have stumbled upon the problem of defining what a memoir actually is. How does memoir differ from autobiography? Well, to my knowledge, it does not differ all that much. Philippe LeJeune defined the autobiography as follows: **“Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.”** In other words, autobiography must focus on the individual and his or her life story through narration. He states that autobiography must fulfil the following four categories: **“1. Form of language: narrative, in prose; 2. Subject treated: individual life, story of a personality; 3. Situation of the author: the author and the narrator are identical; and “4. Position of the narrator: the narrator and the principal character are identical”**. In his view, memoirs do not fulfil the second requirement. It seems quite a bold assumption to make without providing further proof of this notion—and he agrees that the subject of an autobiography may in part be “the chronicle and social or political history.” This further muddles the place of the modern memoir, as many memoirs emphasize the “story of a personality”. The author’s experiences, in the case of the Third Reich, show how the self developed during the period of Nazi persecution, at the time of the Holocaust, and the aftermath of guilt and victimhood.

George Fetherling, in his 2001 introduction to his collection *The Vintage Book of Canadian Memoirs*, states: “people may not agree what a memoir is but they know one when they see it and they create a demand, which writers and publishers rush to satisfy.” Furthermore, he states:

“We would never call the autobiography of a politician or other professional public figure a memoir. Such books are too formal to fit the distinction, following as they do

the straight conventions of non-fiction; too determined to cover the subject's entire life or career and show him or her in the most favourable light. A memoir is more tightly focused, more daring in construction and (its author hopes) more penetrating. A memoir can be of one's life or of other people or of a particular decade—or of a particular place.”

The more informal structure and narrative of the memoir allow voices of ordinary people to come to the forefront, and especially in the German case, allow us to experience the Third Reich through ordinary lives.

The memoir is a necessary component to understanding identity and self. The memoir places the audience and the writer on an even playing field: ordinary people telling extreme experiences to ordinary readers. Klaus Kleinau, a former Napola school student, stated: “It was only late in life that I realized, in regards to this education and recent experiences, that these false ideals are still stuck in the mindset of former classmates and teachers. I have tried to empathize (*hineinzudenken*) with my long gone experiences to reflect on them myself and thus, especially for young people, to make them transparent.” His desire to share his experiences with young people shows how important it was for some memoir writers to find common ground to share experiences. Memoirs, such as Kleinau's, are not only written as a piece of self-reflection, but as educational testimonies of the past.

The sudden amount of memoirs written and published in the past fifty years is noteworthy; the amount of material that has been written about personal experiences is unprecedented. The amount of material written by the Hitler Youth generation, for example, is astonishing. Wulf Kansteiner calls this current trend a “memory wave”, while others named it a “memory boom”. In her work, *The Limits of Autobiography*, Leigh Gilmore notes that the importance of the memoir is directly linked with trauma. While the term “memory boom” describes this phenomenon aptly, it cheapens it slightly: it describes the sudden flux and prosperity of the genre, while expecting it to fall again. It is too early to describe the rise of personal memoirs and autobiographies as a “boom” because we have yet to experience the end of it. Calling it a ‘wave’ also implies a beginning and an ending. Both terms should be used with caution because we cannot predict when the need for self-expression through exposés will come to an end.

Is a memoir “trustworthy” as a primary source document? Yes--if we use LeJeune's understanding of the relationship between reader and narrator. Differs from ie. Dagmar Reese's study on German girls in the 3R, as she collaborates all oral history interviews with archive material. Here, the essence of the text is not ‘disputed’ as these ‘wrong’ memories are how the writers perceived themselves and their remembrances of the past.

Lastly, one of the bigger issues that I have had in creating an understanding of the Hitler Youth generation and their memoirs has been to create a terminology to help conceptualize a way to analyse them. Both the terms of “collective memory” and “collective guilt” are rather vague and in part, have been written about extensively. First of all “collective memory” is not

with multiple problems—first of all, definition. Coined first by Maurice Halbwachs, an anthropologist, the term was picked up by historians quite recently and has been shaped and discussed extensively. Second, “collective guilt” presupposes that I, the scholar, believe that all these Germans are guilty; this is a problematic assumption to make when many do not see themselves as guilty for being in the Hitler Youth or fighting in World War II. How should we discuss these discrepancies?

Therefore, I am proposing a new term— the **“collected memoryscape”**. A “collected memoryscape” contains both the remembered past and the present in which one is writing. The remembered past is put into a wider cultural understanding that includes both concepts of the private and public self. It contains the idea of “what should we think” versus “what do I personally believe”; the first part is much easier to access—it is what we, the out-group, see and read in text, the second not so much because the in-group, so the people who are the HY generation, has dictated what they should be writing and what they should not be writing. So for instance, there is a divide between memoirs published in the US and those published in Germany, and the publication year also makes a huge difference.

Now that we have covered the more theoretical aspects of this paper, we will now begin our discussion on the memoirs. For my study, I have decided, hesitantly at this point, to pick out 50 published memoirs and 50 unpublished memoirs. I am striving to have a total of 50 from females and 50 from men, but this has been proven to be extremely difficult. Women did not write as much as men did, and also the East/West German divide causes problems. It is also difficult to get any accounts from East Germans. The only published East German Hitler Youth memoir, as far as I am aware, is Christa Wolf's *Kindheitmeister*, “Patterns of Childhood”. As I am in the early stages of my research still, the two main chapters I have begun working on are titled “Education and Joining the Hitler Youth” and “Family Background”. I will briefly discuss the more complete one on education and the joining the Hitler Youth.

I want to first give a short quote from one of the memoirs I really enjoyed as a reader; not only because of the way it was written, but also of the emotional aspect to provide you with an example of some of the material I am working with. This is by Armin Lehmann, the Hitler Youth boy who was in the bunker with Hitler, talking about his early childhood and family life: **“I had a very ambiguous relationship with my father. He was a bully and thought me a weakling. I tried to please him but I failed him constantly. My very earliest memory was when I was being cradled by my mother in the front seat of my grandfather's car. I must have been three years old: My father was driving. We were on a trip in the countryside. I suddenly started to cry as children do. I don't know why but it clearly irritated my father. He demanded that I shut up. I didn't. He stopped the car and got out. Opening the door on my mother's side, he tried to ear me out of her arms, but she wouldn't let go of me. ... So Father just pulled the two of us out of the car. Then he got back in the car, slammed the door and drove off. ... Eventually he came back. 'Now you know what happens to boys who cry!' he roared at me.”**

Many members of the Hitler Youth generation began their mandatory education around 1933 after Hitler's rise to power. Although Nazi ideology played a prominent role in education, for some memoirists it seemed that Nazi party ideology did not have immediate effects to school and everyday life, but slowly became the norm. The youngest of the Hitler Youth generation would have been born in the same year, the oldest around eight years old (born 1925). Hans Peter Richter (1925–1993) recounts in the beginning of his autobiographical fiction novel, *Wir waren dabei*, the restless atmosphere of the evening of January 30, 1933 as people poured into the streets to either celebrate or protest Hitler's chancellorship.

Richter, in his bedroom, is watching the scene with his mother from his window. Outside, rioters yelled, "Germany, awake!" Many memoirists do not recall the events of January 1933 as they were too young to remember much, and instead, depict their early childhoods as places of political and social confusion. Many do not remember much of the eventful night of January 30, 1933, as Helga Brachmann comments, "(On the day of Hitler's seizure of power, on the 30th of January 1933, I cannot remember much. I was four years and 8 months old and we lived therefore in the backwaters of Landsberg an der Warthe, near Küstrin)" Another BDM member, Melita Maschmann was ten years old at the time, recalled:

On the evening of January 30 my parents took us children, my twin brother and myself, into the centre of the city. There we witnessed the torchlight procession with which the National Socialists celebrated their victory. Some of the uncanny feel of that night remains with me even today. The crashing tread of the feet, the sombre pomp of the red and black flags, the flickering light from the torches on the faces and the songs with melodies that were at once aggressive and sentimental.

It was in this atmosphere of political confusion, cacophony, that many begin their recollections of their childhoods.

The first day of Volksschule, for any German child, was an important day. Each child was given a Schultüte to celebrate their first steps in education and adulthood. The differences in social class is easy to spot in photographs provided by memoirists—Joachim Fest (b. 1926) sports a huge Schultüte almost the size of his small body proudly, while Elisabet Währish (b. 1927) has a small one, but has an equally large smile on her face.¹ Klaus Kleinau remembers that already his first school days were filled with political instruction. He recalled, "Ich musste meine Klassenlehrer für kurze Zeit im ersten Schuljahr vertreten. Er sagte: "Du übst mit ihnen das Horst-Wessel-Lied ein." They would sing the song during any school ceremony (Feierstunde) and reproduced a few lines of the song into his memoir.² Hans Peter Richter (b. 1925) recounts in *Friedrich*,

Like all German children after their first day at school, Friedrich and I each received a large, cone-shaped paper bag from our parents. Friedrich's was red, mine was blue. My blue bag was a little smaller than Friedrich's. Friedrich opened his right away. He offered me one of his pieces of candy and broke a bar of chocolate so that everyone could have some. I was about to undo the bow on my paper bag when Mother shook her head. She took me aside and told me I should wait until we got home.

...

When we reached home, I stumbled exhausted into the hall. I quickly threw the new satchel into the corner and untied the bow on my paper bag. It contained nothing but a bag of sugared rusks and lots and lots of crumpled paper.

Mother stroked my hair. "But you know, my boy," she said, "that we are poor."

The first day of school was an important one, yet not all memoirists find this event something necessary to reflect on, but the impact that it had on all three children is evident through different ways of portraying it.

Willy Schumann formally began his education in spring 1933, and found his early schooling to be easy. He writes in his memoir that he had taught himself to read around the age of five, and was good at school as a result. From 1933-1937 he was in the same school building with the same teacher, and finding his teacher Miss A. an "excellent teacher." The only changes that occurred in these years, as he recalled, was the addition of Hitler's portrait into their classroom in 1935. He described the portrait as "a youthful-looking man with somewhat piercing blue eyes, who for the next two or three years looked at us schoolchildren with a serious but friendly face." It was in his later school years that Schumann began to view the Führer as the "youngest representative in an unbroken chain of great and heroic men in the history of Germany, as the person who had finally fulfilled the thousand-year-old dream of a new united empire, the Third Reich."

Schumann does not remember when the ideological teaching began, and does not believe that his teacher was a National Socialist, although her home town had been directly influenced by the Treaty of Versailles in 1918. He stated that Miss A. "shared [his parents'] political views." Schumann does not admit neither his father nor mother was Nazis, but his father was a member of the NSDAP and his family blatantly refused to discuss Jewish relations.

In Karl Dürschmidt writes in his memoir, *Mit 15 in Den Krieg*, that at school, the stances of the teachers towards the war and Nazism were highly noticeable: " (The teachers at the school were occasionally dressed in Nazi uniform in the classroom, and would positively assess Nazism and war events. Other teachers were dressed in civilian clothes, as they were neutral and followed the official briefing of the war situation.)" After starting at Oberealschule (middle school), young Dürschmidt became fascinated with the idea of going to a Napola school after a recruiter visited his school. He portrays his interest in going to a Napola quite vividly, going even as far as to persuade his parents to let him sign up for the exam, after he had already signed it at school.

As my last point, I wanted to provide some commentary on Gunter Grass's 2006 memoir "Peeling an Onion." Grass, a Nobel Prize winning German author, revealed in his memoir to have been in the Waffen-SS during World War II. This sparked a huge controversy in Germany in 2006, concerning how Grass had 'hidden' this past from the public and hadn't

spoken about it until then. For some, it meant that it diminished his political power, and raised further controversy with Joachim Fest's memoir, which appeared a few months before Grass's. Fest, as some of you may know, was a conservative German, raised by an aristocratic family who opposed Hitler. This raises a few final questions that we can reflect on: Whose past is more valuable? Who should we remember as an example of the Hitler Youth generation?

Thank you.