Resource 17.1:
School for Barbarians

Creating Context

The Nazis paid an exceptional amount of attention to recruiting young people into their movement. In 1935, Hitler declared, “He alone who owns the youth, gains the future.” What do you think he meant by this statement? Do you agree or disagree? What strategies do you think the Nazis could use to win over young people?

You will need to know the following vocabulary terms in order to fully understand this resource:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>intrepid</th>
<th>barbarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>brutal</td>
<td>denounce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jungvolk</td>
<td>salvation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitler Youth/HJ</td>
<td>blockwart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JungMaedel</td>
<td>placard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

League of German Girls

An enhanced version of this reading is available on the Facing History & Ourselves website.

Hitler believed he was on side of the history. He claimed that “When an opponent declares, ‘I will not come over to your side,’ I calmly say, ‘Your child belongs to us already. You will pass on. Your descendants, however, now stand in the new camp. In a short time they will know nothing else but this new community.’” In Hitler’s mind, young Germans were the key. In speech after speech, he declared:

We older ones are used up. Yes, we are old already... We are cowardly and sentimental... But my magnificent youngsters? Are there finer ones anywhere in the world? Look at these young men and boys? What material! With them I can make a new world... A violently active, dominating, intrepid, brutal youth – that is what I am after. Youth must be all those things. It must be indifferent to pain. There must be no weakness or tenderness in it. I want to see once more in its eyes the gleam of pride and independence of the beast of prey... I intend to have an athletic youth – that is the first and the chief thing... I will have no intellectual training. Knowledge is ruin to my young men.

By 1939, about 90 percent of the “Aryan” children in Germany belonged to Nazi youth groups. They started at the age of six. At ten, boys were initiated into the Jungvolk and at fourteen promoted to the Hitler Youth or HJ (for Hitler Jugend). Girls belonged to the Jungmaedel and then the BDM (the Bund Deutscher Maedel or the League of German Girls). In such groups, said Hitler, “These young people will learn nothing else but how to think German and act German... And they will never be free again, not in their whole lives.”

Facing History and Ourselves – May 2013
Erika Mann, a German who opposed the Nazis, wrote a book called *School for Barbarians*. It explained to Americans how the Nazis tried to carry out Hitler’s ideas.

Every child says “Heil Hitler!” from 50 to 150 times a else but this new day, immeasurably more often than the old neutral greetings. The formula is required by law; if you meet a friend on the way to school, you say it; study periods are opened and closed with “Heil Hitler!”; “Heil Hitler!” says the postman, the streetcar conductor, the girl who sells you notebooks at the stationery store; and if your parents’ first words when you come home to lunch are not “Heil Hitler!” they have been guilty of a punishable offense, and can be denounced. “Heil Hitler!” they shout, in the Jungvolk and Hitler Youth. “Heil Hitler!” cry the girls in the League of German Girls. Your evening prayers must close with “Heil Hitler!” if you take your devotions seriously.

Officially – when you say hello to your superiors in school or in a group – the words are accompanied by the act of throwing the right arm high; but an unofficial greeting among equals requires only a comparatively lax lifting of the forearm, with the fingers closed and pointing forward. This Hitler greeting, this “German” greeting, repeated countless times from morning to bedtime, stamps the whole day. “Heil” really means salvation, and used to be applied to relations between man and his God; one would speak of ewiges Heil (eternal salvation), and the adjective “holy” derives from the noun. But now there is the new usage...

You leave the house in the morning, “Heil Hitler” on your lips; and on the stairs of your apartment house you meet the Blockwart. A person of great importance and some danger, the Blockwart has been installed by the government as a Nazi guardian. He controls the block, reporting on it regularly, checking up on the behavior of its residents. It’s worth it to face right about, military style, and to give him the “big” Hitler salute, with the right arm as high as it will go. All the way down the street, the flags are waving, every window colored with red banners, and the black swastika in the middle of each. You don’t stop to ask why; it’s bound to be some national event. Not a week passes without an occasion on which families are given one reason or another to hang out the swastika. Only the Jews are excepted under the strict regulation. Jews are not Germans, they do not belong to the “Nation,” they can have no “national events.”

You meet the uniforms on the way to school: the black [uniformed] S.S. men, the men of the Volunteer Labor Service, and the Reichswehr soldiers. And if some of the streets are closed, you know that an official is driving through town. Nobody has ever told you that the high officials of other countries pass without the precautions of closed streets.

And here, where a building is going up, the workmen are gone – probably because of the “national event.” But the sign is on the scaffolding. “We have our Führer to thank that we are working here today. Heil Hitler!” The familiar sign, seen everywhere with men at work, on roads, barracks, sport fields. What does it mean
to you? Do you think of a world outside, with workers who need not thank a Führer for their jobs? Certainly not – what you have, imprinted on your mind, is the sentence, deep and accepted as an old melody.

There are more placards as you continue past hotels, restaurants, indoor swimming pools, to school. They read “No Jews allowed;” “Jews not desired here;” “Not for Jews.” And what do you feel? Agreement? Pleasure? Disgust? Opposition? You don’t feel any of these. You don’t feel anything, you’ve seen these placards for almost five years. This is a habit, it is all perfectly natural, of course Jews aren’t allowed here. Five years in the life of a child of nine – that’s his life, after four years of infancy, his whole personal, conscious existence.

Through the Nazi street walks the Nazi child. There is nothing to disturb him, nothing to attract his attention or criticism. The stands sell Nazi papers almost exclusively; all German papers are Nazi; foreign papers are forbidden, if they do not please the men at the top. The child won’t be surprised at their huge headlines: “UNHEARD-OF ACTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST GERMANY IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA!” “JEWISH GANGSTERS RULE AMERICA!” “THE COMMUNIST TERROR IN SPAIN SUPPORTED BY THE POPE!” “150 MORE PRIESTS UNMASKED AS SEXUAL CRIMINALS!”

“That’s how it is in the world,” the child thinks. “What luck we’re in, to have a Führer. He’ll tell the whole bunch – Czechs, Jews, Americans, Communists and priests – where to get off!”

There are no doubts, no suspicion at the coarse and hysterical tone of the dispatches, no hint that they may be inexact or false. No, these things are part of the everyday world of the Nazis, like the Blockwart, the swastika, the signs reading “No Jews allowed.” They add up to an atmosphere that is torture, a fuming poison for a free-born human being. The German child breathes this air. There is no other condition wherever Nazis are in power; and here in Germany they do rule everywhere, and their supremacy over the German child, as he learns and eats, marches, grows up, breathes, is complete.

17.1 Comprehension & Connections

1. Re-read Erika Mann’s description of the life of a young person in Nazi Germany. What word or phrase would you choose to describe this life? What evidence from the reading supports the word or phrase you chose? Write the word or phrase in your journal, and then add a few sentences describing why you chose it.

2. Hitler demanded that the nation produce a “violently active, dominating, intrepid, brutal youth.” What part did the schools play in carrying out that goal? What part did youth groups play? What about the media, and society as a whole? How do your answers explain why Erika Mann called her book A School for Barbarians?