

# YOUNG PEOPLE:



## FOR OR AGAINST THE NAZIS?

DURING THE TWELVE YEARS OF THE Nazi state three separate age groups passed through adolescence, that is the years between the fourteenth and eighteenth birthdays. Each group had its own distinctive experiences.

Those whose adolescence fell in the years 1933-36 had already had important, formative experiences before the Nazi seizure of power. They were in the front line for incorporation into the Hitler Youth and the so-called *Volksgemeinschaft* (racial community) of the Third Reich. They had also experienced the economic crisis of the

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*Not all young Germans  
were enthusiasts for  
Hitler Youth ideas —  
and some actively  
opposed them.*

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(Above) 'Heil Hitler' and a map proclaiming Germany's pre-1919 borders are focal points for primary school assembly, 1934.

early 1930s and were therefore quite receptive to the benefits offered by the rearmament programme (particularly after 1935-36), as well as to the ideas of *Führerstaat* (leadership state), with its promise of an end to 'party squabbles', and of the 'restoration of national greatness'.

The young people of the period 1936-39 had no such memories. They had gone through schools that bore the stamp of National Socialism. For many, adolescence shaped by the Hitler Youth was something taken for granted and to which there was no

alternative. Against group comradeship and leisure activities, occasional irritations in the form of brutality and intolerance, drill and demagoguery, were often insignificant. And what is more, the Hitler Youth – as a rival to the traditional authorities of home and school – could to some extent serve as a 'counter-authoritarian' sanctuary. Involvement in its activities thus offered simultaneously the promise of making a name for oneself but also growing pressure towards uniformity. This latter feature grew stronger as the Hitler Youth became more bureaucratic, as its leadership corps grew older, and as the use of coercion

to draw remaining young people into the organisation increased.

The age group whose adolescence occurred during the war years 1939-45, experienced particularly the empty aspects of daily life in the Hitler Youth, characterised by coercion and drill. Quite a few youth leaders were conscripted into the army, and from 1942-43 onwards many club buildings and sports fields were destroyed by the bombings. With this 'war generation' the grip of National Socialist institutions was simultaneously at its most far-reaching and increasingly repellent.

National Socialist youth policy

A 1933 'Hitler Youth' parade. (Inset) Nazi symbols and ceremonies were put across at the youngest possible age – cut-out figures from 'Pimpfe', a kindergarten handbook for the Hitler Youth.



aimed to secure the younger generation's total loyalty to the regime and their willingness to fight in the war that lay ahead. All competitors had to be eliminated and Nazi forms of organisation and militaristic education developed. These tasks were to be achieved with the distinctively Nazi combination of compulsion and prohibitions on the one hand and incentives and enticements on the other.

In practice, contradictions arose between these objectives of youth policy, and particularly between the different methods of realising them: contradictions which fragmented and obstructed what appeared at first sight to be a uniform programme of totalitarian assimilation. For example, military conscription robbed the Hitler Youth of many badly needed older youth leaders. Competition between the rival authorities of school and the Hitler Youth gave rise to areas of conflict in which young people could play the one off against the other. And, not least, the ideological content of National Socialism remained much too vague. Fragmentary notions of racial and national arrogance were mixed up with traditional pedagogic humanism: the model of the front-line soldier mixed up with the idea that there was an especially profound and valuable 'German' culture; backward-looking agrarian Romanticism mixed up with enthusiasm for modern technology.

The life stories of young people under the swastika often contain the most contradictory impressions. If there was any common denominator, it was an education in the reckless, ruthless pursuit of genuine or incalculated interests. The following extract hints at how this came about:

No one in our class ever read *Mein Kampf*. I myself only took quotations from the book. On the whole we didn't know much about Nazi ideology. Even anti-Semitism was brought in rather marginally at school – for example via Richard Wagner's essay 'The Jews in Music' – and outside school the display copies of *Der Stürmer* made the idea questionable, if anything. . . . Nevertheless, we were politically programmed: to obey orders, to cultivate the soldierly 'virtue' of standing to attention and saying 'Yes, Sir', and to stop thinking when the magic word 'Fatherland' was uttered and Germany's honour and greatness were mentioned.

War seemed 'normal'; violence seemed 'legitimate'. Hitler's foreign policy achievements between 1936 and 1939 had accustomed the Germans to regard the combination of



Conscription began to cream off older Hitler Youth leaders as Germany rearmed; 1914-18 'war babies' undergoing medical tests in Berlin.

violent posturing, assertion of their 'legal right' to wipe out the 'shame of Versailles', and risk-taking as a recipe for success.

The main arm of National Socialist youth policy was the Hitler Youth. By the end of 1933 all youth organisations, apart from the Catholic ones (which for the time being remained protected owing to the Nazi government's Concordat with the Vatican), had been either banned (like the socialist youth movement) or 'co-ordinated' more or less voluntarily and integrated into the Hitler Youth 'like the non-political *bündisch* youth movement and, in late 1933/early 1934, the Protestant organisations).

By the end of 1933, therefore, the Hitler Youth already contained 47 per cent of boys aged between ten and fourteen (in the *Deutsches Jungvolk*) and 38 per cent of boys between fourteen and eighteen (in the Hitler Youth proper): However, only 15 per cent of girls between ten and fourteen were organised (in the *Jugendmädelsbund* and only 8 per cent of those between fifteen and twenty-one (in the *Bund Deutscher Mädchen*). The Hitler Youth Law of December 1st, 1936, called for the incorporation of all German youth, and this was backed up with growing pressure on those remaining outside to enrol 'voluntarily' - until two executive orders ancillary to the Hitler Youth Law, issued on March 25th, 1939, made 'youth service' compulsory.

In the years immediately following 1933, many did not regard member-

ship in the Hitler Youth as compulsory. The Hitler Youth built upon many practices of the youth organisations of the Weimar period, offered a wide range of leisure activities, and, at the lower levels (which in the everyday running of things were the most important), was led not infrequently by people who had had previous experience in other youth organisations. In addition, the Hitler Youth uniform often provided the chance to engage, sometimes quite aggressively, in conflict with traditional figures of authority: the teacher, the father, the foreman, the local clergyman.

For many young people in the provinces, where the youth movement was not widespread before 1933, the arrival of the Hitler Youth often meant the first access to the leisure activities in a youth organisation, the impetus to build a youth club or sports field, or the opportunity to go on weekend or holiday trips away from one's narrow home environment.

The emancipatory openings for girls were even greater. In the *Bund Deutscher Mädchen* girls could escape from the female role-model centred around family and children - a role-model which, for that matter, was also propagated by the National Socialists. They could pursue activities which were otherwise reserved for boys; and if they worked as functionaries for the *Bund Deutscher Mädchen* they might even approach the classic 'masculine' type of the political organiser who was never at home. Such opportunities

remained limited, however, and were withdrawn increasingly owing to the Nazis' general discrimination against women. Yet these groups undoubtedly proved, in many practical day-to-day respects, to be a modernising force.

With the consolidation of the Hitler Youth as a large-scale bureaucratic organisation, and with the gradual ageing of its leadership cadres in the course of the 1930s, the movements' attraction to the young people began to decline. Political campaigns within the Hitler Youth against those who had been leaders in the Weimar youth movement and against styles and behaviour allegedly associated with that organisation, led to the disciplining and purging of units. The campaign to bring everyone into the Hitler Youth ranks brought in those who previously had proclaimed their antipathy simply by their absence. Disciplinary and surveillance measures to enforce 'youth service' made even harmless everyday pleasures such as meetings of friends and cliques criminal offences. Above all, the claim of legal power by Hitler Youth patrols, whose members were scarcely older than the young people they were keeping track of, provoked general indignation. And in addition, even before the outbreak of war, the Hitler Youth concentrated increasingly on premilitary drill.

The belief that the Hitler Youth successfully mobilised young people is only half the story. The more the Hitler Youth arrogated state powers to itself and the more completely it drew young people into its organisation, the more obvious became the examples of deviant behaviour among adolescents. By the end of the 1930s thousands of young people were turning away from the leisure activities of the Hitler Youth and finding their own unregimented style in independent gangs. Indeed, they defended their independence all the more insistently as Hitler Youth patrols and the Gestapo increased their pressure. In 1942 the Reich Youth Leadership had to admit:

The formation of cliques, i.e. groupings of young people outside the Hitler Youth, has been on the increase before and, particularly, during the war to such a degree that one must speak of a serious risk of the political, moral and criminal subversion of youth.

The leadership could not now make the excuse that the people involved had been conditioned by the Weimar 'system': by 'Marxism', 'clericalism' or the old youth movements. The adolescents who made up this opposition

in the late 1930s and early 1940s were the very generation on whom Adolf Hitler's system had operated unhindered.

Amidst the wealth of evidence of unaccommodating behaviour, two groups stand out particularly clearly, groups which shared a rejection of the Hitler Youth but which differed in their styles, backgrounds and actions: the 'Edelweiss Pirates' (*Edelweisspiraten*) and the 'Swing Youth' (*Swingjugend*).

The first Edelweiss Pirates appeared at the end of the 1930s in western Germany. The names of the individual groups, their badges (metal edelweiss flowers worn on the collar, the skull and crossbones, pins with coloured heads), their dress (usually a checked shirt, dark short trousers, white socks) and their activities all varied, but were based upon a single underlying model. 'Roving Dudes' from Essen, 'Kittelbach Pirates' from Oberhausen or Düsseldorf (named after a stream in the north of Düsseldorf) and 'Navajos' from Cologne all regarded themselves as 'Edelweiss Pirate' groups. This agreement took on real meaning during weekend trips into the surrounding countryside, where groups from the whole region met up, pitched tents, sang, talked, and together 'bashed' Hitler Youth patrols doing their rounds.

The opposition – the Hitler Youth, Gestapo and the law – also soon categorised the groups under a single heading, having first wavered in case the 'youth movement' (*bündisch*) label would save them the bother of having to analyse new, spontaneous forms of oppositional activity and construct corresponding new sets of prohibitions. It soon became clear, however, that although it was possible to spot precursor groups and so-called 'wild' *bündisch* organisations in the early 1930s, there was no continuity of personnel (the 'delinquents' of 1935-37 long since had been conscripted to the front) and there was no direct ideological line of descent.

The Edelweiss Pirate groups arose spontaneously, as young people aged between fourteen and eighteen got together to make the most of their free time away from the control of the Hitler Youth. The age composition of the group, with a clustering around it of younger children and older war-wounded men and women in reserved occupations, was not fortuitous: boys of seventeen and eighteen were conscripted into the National Labour Service and then into the Wehrmacht, while at fourteen

Poster for the 'Bund Deutscher Mädel', women's section of the Hitler Youth.



boys reached the school-leaving age and could thus escape from the immediate, day-to-day sphere of Hitler Youth control. They were taking their first steps into work – as apprentices or, thanks to the shortage of manpower caused by the war, increasingly as relatively well paid unskilled workers. To an increased sense of self-esteem and independence the continuing obligation of Hitler Youth service up to the age of eighteen could contribute very little. The war reduced the Hitler Youth's leisure attractions: instead there was repeated paramilitary drill with pointless exercises in obedience, which were all the more irksome for being supervised by Hitler Youth leaders scarcely any older than the rank and file, yet who often stood out by the virtue of their grammar- or secondary-school background. 'It's the Hitler Youth's own fault,' one Edelweiss Pirate from Düsseldorf said, explaining his group's slogan 'Eternal war on the Hitler Youth': 'every order I was given contained a threat.'

The self-confidence of the Edelweiss Pirates and their image among their peers were unmistakable, as an

Oberhausen mining instructor found in the case of his trainees in 1941:

Every child knows who the KP [common abbreviation for Kittelbach Pirates] are. They are everywhere; there are more of them than there are Hitler Youth. And they all know each other, they stick close together . . . They pick up the patrols, because there are so many of them. They don't agree with anything. They don't go to work either, they're always down by the canal, at the lock.

The overriding factor common to these groups was the territorial principle: they belonged together because they lived or worked together; and a gang usually consisted of about a dozen boys and a few girls. The fact that girls were involved at all distinguished these oppositional groups from the strictly segregated *Bund Deutscher Mädel* and Hitler Youth. The presence of girls at the evening get-togethers and on the weekend trips into the countryside gave the adolescents a relatively unrestricted opportunity to have sexual experiences. In this respect they were much less prudish than their parents' generation, particularly the representatives of Nazi organisations with their almost

obsessive fixation on the repression of sexuality. Nevertheless, sexual life in these groups was no doubt much less orgiastic than contemporary authors of official reports believed, or wanted others to believe, when they sought to construct a trinity of delinquency out of (sexual and criminal) degeneracy, (anti-organisational and anti-authoritarian) rebellion, and (political) opposition.

The high point of the pirates' free time was the weekend, when the young people could go off on hikes. Armed with rucksacks, sheath knives and bread-and-butter rations, sleeping in tents or barns, they spent a carefree time with like-minded young people from other towns – although always on the watch for Hitler Youth patrols, whom they, prudently calculating their own strength, either sought to avoid or taunted and fell in with relish.

An important reason for this need to get as much space as possible as often as possible between themselves and their everyday conditions was the wish to avoid the 'educative' incursions of adults and the daily experiences of denunciations, spying, orders and punishments by National Socialist institutions that were directly bound up with these incursions. The youth movement's old reason for hiking – to withdraw from the pressures of the adult world – was intensified and given a political dimension in the Third Reich.

It is an astonishing fact that quite a few of these adolescents took long journeys during their holidays, as far as the Black Forest and the Tirol, to Munich, Vienna and Berlin – and this during wartime, despite bans on travel, restrictions on freedom of movement caused by the system of food ration-cards, and police checks. The youths made ends meet with casual work, hitched lifts, joined up with other hitch-hikers, and in the process demonstrated the existence and vitality of informal structures of support and communication even in the bureaucratised war economy of the Third Reich.

If the long holiday journeys and shorter weekend trips opened up realms of experience that were normally out of the reach of working-class children (especially during the war), the daily meetings after work made possible the development of distinctive identities that marked off the working-class youth subcultures of the Edelweiss Pirates from the dominant, official culture of the Hitler Youth. At these evening gatherings people chatted, told stories, played

the guitar and sang songs – especially hiking songs or popular hits about foreign lands, adventure, tough men, beautiful girls. No cliché from the world of commercial entertainment was left unused. Nevertheless, the Edelweiss Pirates appropriated these banal stereotypes for their own ends. For one thing, they were not singing the Hitler Youth songs prescribed as 'suitable for young people' or the fighting songs of the chauvinistic German military tradition; they sang adult hit songs, which dealt with adventure not allowed the young, with eating, drinking and love. The Edelweiss Pirates developed a remarkable knack for rewriting lyrics – inserting new phrases, lines or whole verses which catapulted their own lives into this dream world.

The Edelweiss Pirates turned the traditional songs of the hiking and

youth movements to similar use. They adapted or reworded these songs and used them as signals of protest, either because the songs themselves were disapproved of or even banned by the Hitler Youth or because the names of supposed foes in the original texts were replaced with those of the Nazis, Gestapo or Hitler Youth.

The war years brought an increasing number of clashes between the Edelweiss Pirates and the Hitler Youth. On July 17th, 1943, the Düsseldorf-Grafenberg branch of the Nazi Party reported to the Gestapo:

Re: 'Edelweiss Pirates'. The said youths are throwing their weight around again. I have been told that gatherings of young people have become more conspicuous than ever [in a local park], especially since the last air raid on Düsseldorf. These adolescents, aged between 12 and 17, hang around into the late evening with musical instru-



*The Edelweiss Pirates developed their own lifestyle, dress, and working-class 'street credibility'. Navajo 'Wild Boys' from Cologne, Easter 1940.*





*Middle-class teenagers rebelled against Nazi culture by adopting English and American fashions and music. (Below) Jazz and jitterbugging at a Hamburg 'swing' festival 1940.*



ments and young females. Since this riff-raff is in large part outside the Hitler Youth and adopts a hostile attitude towards the organisation, they represent a danger to other young people. It has recently been established that members of the armed forces too are to be found among these young people and they, owing to their membership in the *Wehrmacht*, exhibit particularly arrogant behaviour. There is a suspicion that it is these youths who have covered the walls of the pedestrian subway on the Altenbergstrasse with the slogans 'Down with Hitler', 'The OKW [*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, Military High Command] is lying', 'Medals for Murder', 'Down with Nazi Brutality' etc. However often these inscriptions are removed, within a few days new ones reappear on the walls.

The conflict grew; on the one side was a power apparatus whose drive for perfection led to ever more irrational measures of coercion and surveillance; on the other, gangs of young people who had nothing in their favour apart from their large number and their ability to retreat into the hiding-place of everyday normality.

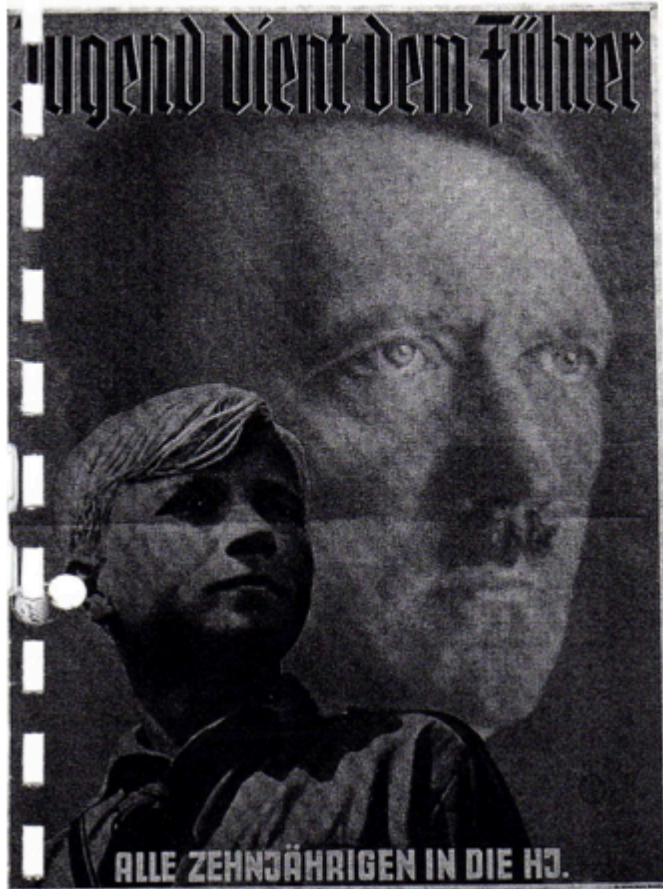
The Gestapo and Hitler Youth brought to bear an armoury of repressive weapons that ranged from individual warnings, raids and temporary arrest (often followed by release with the public branding of a shaven head) to weekend detention, corrective education, referral to a labour camp, youth concentration camp or criminal trial. Thousands were caught in the net; in a single day, on December 7th, 1942, the Düsseldorf Gestapo broke up the following groups: 28 groups containing 739 adolescents in Düsseldorf, Duisburg, Essen and Wuppertal, including the Cologne Edelweiss Pirates whose so-called ringleaders were publicly hanged in Cologne-Ehrenfeld in November 1944. Indeed, as the curtain was coming down on the Third Reich, the 'Reichsführer SS' and head of the German police (Himmler) issued a decree on October 25th, 1944, on the 'combating of youth gangs', the last in the long series of bans and prosecutions in the attempt to defeat the protest movements.

As long as the Nazis needed arma-

ment workers and future soldiers, they could not exterminate German youth as they exterminated the Poles and the Jews; they were forced to use more sophisticated treatment - for their ideological concept of the 'healthy stock of German youth'. But a subculture without organised structures only rarely throws up 'ringleaders' who can easily be singled out. An alternative way of organising free time, which many observe and with which very many more of the same age sympathise, cannot be penalised in blanket fashion. A sceptical attitude towards work, authority, order and morality can be dealt with punitively in individual cases, but not when a considerable portion of the younger generation begins to subscribe to it.

Therefore the institutions of the Nazi state reacted to the Edelweiss Pirate movement with manifest uncertainty. Some state functionaries regarded the offences as silly children's pranks, a result of the degeneration of youth caused by the war and the waning appeal of the Hitler Youth, deprived of its leaders by military conscription. Others smelled large-scale conspiracy and looked for secret organisations, instigators behind the scenes - in other words, projected their own familiar schemata onto a movement they did not understand. But the Edelweiss Pirates were neither simply 'deprived children' nor unimpeachable political resistance fighters. They displayed behaviour that deviated from the desirable social norm with a political rejection of National Socialism, and its maintenance of an authoritarian, hierarchical and militaristic way of life.

All Edelweiss Pirates rejected the Nazis; indeed, this rejection and the elements of an alternative life-style defined them. Few, however, had a definite political point of view, something one can hardly expect in the case of fourteen to eighteen-year-olds. They seem, rather, to have set their own experiences as a group against the specific and abstract demands which National Socialism made on them. None of the Edelweiss Pirates was content with mere passive rejection of Nazism; they wanted to do something against the Hitler Youth, but only a few went beyond everyday acts of petty provocation. These few, however, stuck Allied propaganda leaflets they found in the woods into people's letter boxes, or joined organised resistance groups. In Düsseldorf in 1942 Communists, including the Communist Party leader Wilhelm Knöchjel, made contact with Edelweiss Pirates such as Werner Heyden,



'Youth serves the Führer' — the official version of Aryan conformity. Poster recruiting ten year olds for the Hitler Youth.

received reports on popular opinion from him and gave him stickers and leaflets to distribute. In Cologne Renfeld in 1944 Edelweiss Pirates joined an underground group which in the maze of bombed streets and houses offered shelter to German deserters, prisoners of war, forced labourers and prisoners from concentration camps. They got supplies by making armed raids on military depôts, assaulted Nazis and took part in partisan-type attacks — one of which indeed claimed the chief of the Cologne Gestapo in the autumn of 1944.

Thus, members of the Edelweiss Pirate movement spanned the whole range of nonconformist behaviour, from conscious non-participation to open protest and political resistance. The common denominator in all these activities was the creation of a divergent subculture among sections of working-class youth. This derived its political pungency from two sources: in the first place, the rigid power claims of National Socialism could tolerate no deviant behaviour; and secondly, the conflict could also be seen crudely in terms of class conflict between the working-

class Pirates and the bourgeois National Socialists. The Edelweiss Pirates rebelled against the Nazi authorities and regimented leisure; their songs, their style of protest, their demeanour indicated that they had seen through the phraseology of the *Volksgemeinschaft*.

A quite different form of popular culture developed among young people from the upper middle class: the 'Swing' movement. Its adherents took every opportunity to avoid *völkische* music and the 'moon-in-June' triviality of German hit tunes in order to listen to jazz and swing numbers, either on records or with live bands. Initially some of these events were allowed to take place in public; then, when Hitler Youth officials took offence at them, they were banned. In one internal Hitler Youth report about a swing festival in Hamburg in February 1940, which was attended by 500-600 adolescents, one can hear all the *leitmotifs* that pervade the lamentations of authorities faced by the jazz and rock cultures of the twentieth century:

The dance music was all English and American. Only swing dancing and jitterbugging took place. At the entrance to

the hall stood a notice on which the words 'Swing prohibited' had been altered to 'Swing requested'. Without exception the participants accompanied the dances and songs by singing the English lyrics. Indeed, throughout the evening they attempted to speak only English; and some tables even French.

The dancers made an appalling sight. None of the couples danced normally; there was only swing of the worst sort. Sometimes two boys danced with one girl; sometimes several couples formed a circle, linking arms and jumping, slapping hands, even rubbing the backs of their heads together; and then, bent double, with the top half of the body hanging loosely down, long hair flopping into the face, they dragged themselves round practically on their knees. When the band played a rumba, the dancers went into wild ecstasy. They all leaped around and mumbled the chorus in English. The band played wilder and wilder numbers; none of the players was sitting any longer, they all 'jitterbugged' on the stage like wild animals. Frequently boys could be observed dancing together, without exception with two cigarettes in the mouth, one in each corner . . .

With the ban on public functions, the swing movement shifted to informal groupings where, naturally, its character became more sharply defined. Swing clubs sprang up particularly in big cities: Hamburg, Kiel, Berlin, Stuttgart, Frankfurt, Dresden, Halle and Karlsruhe. Their members were predominantly middle-class adolescents with enough schooling to be able to use the English lyrics and bits of foreign slang. Like the Edelweiss Pirates, who had used German-language hits against the National Socialists, so the *Swing-Jugend* picked up mainstream jazz that was quite permissible in variety shows and dances and radicalised it: they made it into an emblem of a youth culture that rejected the Hitler-Youth ideals, stripped it of its domesticated dance-floor character and favoured hotter varieties of what in Nazi parlance was termed 'negro music'. Dance music gave way to hot jazz; steps as learned in dancing classes gave way to free, spontaneous rhythmic movement, erect posture and tidy dress gave way to 'jitterbugging', hair 'down to the collar' (to quote the same Hitler-Youth report) and a cult of 'slovenliness' and 'sleaziness'.

The characteristics of the swing scene reflected the difference in social background between the offspring of the urban middle class and the working-class Edelweiss Pirates. The latter met on street corners and in parks, outside the confines of the