



Life in Nazi Germany

This is a transcript of the [Life in Nazi Germany](https://www.mrallsophistory.com) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

This podcast will look at three broad issues: the experiences of young people, of women and families, and the persecution of minorities.

It's hardly surprising that the Nazis had so much support from young people. After all, the Nazis reorganised every aspect of the school system to make children loyal to them. At school you would have learned about the history of Germany. You would have been outraged to find out how the German army was 'stabbed in the back' by the weak politicians who had made peace after the First World War. You might well remember the hardships of the 1920s for yourself, but in school you would have been told how these were caused by Jews squeezing profits out of honest Germans.

By the time you were a senior pupil, your studies in history would make you confident that loyalty to the Führer was right and good. Your biology lessons would have informed you that you were special as one of the Aryan race, which was superior in intelligence and strength to the *untermensch* or subhuman Jews and Slavs of Eastern Europe. Even maths and science were used to get across the Nazi messages of racial hatred and the glory of war.

The Nazi youth organisations were also very attractive. As a member of the Hitler Youth or the League of German Maidens you would have marched in exciting parades with loud bands. You would probably be physically fit; your leisure time would also be devoted to Hitler and the Nazis. You'd be a strong cross country runner and confident at reading maps. After years of exciting summer camps you would be comfortable camping out of doors and, if you were a boy, you would know how to clean a rifle and keep it in good condition just like a real soldier.

The Nazi propaganda machine was also deliberately targeting young people and, as a child in Nazi Germany, you might well feel slightly alienated from your parents because they weren't as keen on the Nazis as you were. After all, your family might expect your first loyalty to be to your family whereas the Hitler Youth made it clear that the first loyalty of young people was to Adolf Hitler.

Many young people were attracted to the Nazi youth movements by the leisure opportunities they offered. Then again, there were really no alternatives. All other youth organizations had been either absorbed or made illegal. Even so, only half of all German boys were members in 1933 and only fifteen percent of girls. In 1939 membership of a Nazi youth movement was made compulsory but, as the war progressed, the activities of the youth movement focused increasingly on the war effort and military drill. Subsequently the popularity of the movements decreased and an anti-Hitler youth movement developed. The Nazis identified two distinct groups of young people who they were worried about: the 'Swing Movement' and the 'Edelweiss Pirates'.

The Swing Movement resented the way that the Nazis control people's lives, and showed their discontent through their interest in band music such as American jazz and swing. They



hung out in nightclubs and bars, and danced American dances. They even opposed the Nazis directly, but the Swing Movement was only a tiny minority of young people who generally came from better off families. Nevertheless they did irritate the Nazis because the Nazis did not like the fact that they did not conform. They also viewed the jazz music they listened to as corrupt.

The Edelweiss Pirate was a name given to many small groups of young people from many different parts of Germany. They wore the edelweiss flower as a symbol of their resistance to the Nazis and the earliest groups appeared in 1934. By 1939 there were an estimated two thousand Edelweiss Pirate groups. Some Pirate groups were like the swing groups - they just opposed Nazi control of their lives - but others opposed Nazi political ideas and would make fun of Hitler Youth groups or even violently attack them. When the war started in 1939 the Pirates stepped up their activities. Some groups were involved in spreading anti-Nazi propaganda and even in helping enemy air crews have been shot down. But soon the Nazis began to clamp down on the groups. In December 1942, 739 Edelweiss Pirates in Cologne were sent to labour camps. In 1944 the Nazis hanged to the leaders of the Cologne Edelweiss Pirates.

The Nazis were a very male-dominated organization, and Hitler himself had a very traditional view of the role of the German woman as wife and mother. It is worth remembering that many women agreed with him. For example, in many small towns and rural areas traditional values about women and the family were very strong. Working women - especially young working women - were seen as immoral or corrupt, and many older women agreed with the view that women should be wives and mothers. The churches generally supported the idea of women as homemakers, wives and mothers, and many unemployed men felt that women should give up work and let men have their jobs. There's also evidence that many women found the Nazi women's organisations very rewarding: they got to meet new people and travel around the country, and Hitler was particularly popular amongst women.

The Nazis supported their message about women with actions. As soon as they came to power they forced many professional women to quit their jobs. Women were banned from civil service jobs in 1933 and from working as lawyers in 1936. In the League of German Maidens (the BDM) and at school, girls were taught about health and housekeeping skills. Women were offered cheap loans and grants if they married and had children, and an honours system was even set up. Known as the Motherhood Cross, a couple with eight children got the highest gold cross award.

These measures worked to some extent. The birth rate in Germany increased from 15 per 1000 in 1933 to 20 per 1000 in 1939 but, as with so many aspects of Nazi Germany, these policies ended in chaos and the Nazis had to change track. In 1936 Germany's economy was recovering. Unemployment was falling and the armed forces were growing. By 1938 Germany was short of workers. Women took the new jobs. By 1939 there were 1.4 million more working women than they have been in 1933, but mostly these were in low grade jobs with low wages.



There were also some very well-known women in Nazi Germany. Magda Goebbels, the wife of propaganda boss Joseph Goebbels, often appeared in news films. She talked and wrote about health, beauty and fashion. Leni Riefenstahl was a high-profile film producer and director. Gertrude Scholtz-Klink was head of the Nazi Women's Bureau, although she was excluded from any important discussions such as the one to conscript female labour in 1942. It's important to remember that, while some women did do very successfully in Nazi Germany, these were the exceptions to the rule as most women were forced into a traditional role as primarily the mother and housewife.

In addition to young people and women and families it's also important to consider the role of minorities within Nazi Germany. The Nazis used terror tactics against their political opponents but also ran terror campaigns against other groups that did not appear to be a threat to their power at all. The Nazis believed that the ideal German was an Aryan and that the Aryans were a 'master race' that were superior to all other racial groups. Hitler feared the Aryans would mix with inferior races, so the Nazis persecuted and later murdered members of what they called racially inferior groups.

Gypsies and Jews suffered most. It is estimated that about 500,000 gypsies died in death camps such as Auschwitz, while up to six million Jews did. However these weren't the only targets of Nazi persecution. They also persecuted anyone who did not fit their idea of an ideal German, and they called these people asocials or undesirables. The Nazis thought that Germany wasted money looking after them and that their presence polluted the country. Hitler said that getting rid of some of the weakest Germans would strengthen Germany. Ideal Germans were socially useful: they worked hard and served the fatherland, so the Nazis persecuted tramps, beggars, alcoholics and anyone who refused to work. Around 500,000 tramps and beggars were sent to concentration camps in 1933. Ideal Germans pledged total loyalty to Hitler so the Nazis persecuted anyone who refused to do this. For example Jehovah's Witnesses refused to offer total loyalty to anyone other than God, so one-third of them in Germany were sent to concentration camps. Ideal Germans married, had children, and created stable families, so the Nazis persecuted homosexuals, prostitutes, and problem families. Ideal Germans were strong and powerful, so the Nazis persecuted mentally handicapped people and those with inherited diseases. Around 350,000 were sterilised. Later the Nazis started a euthanasia campaign. About 200,000 people were killed in nursing homes.

The group that suffered most under the Nazis were the Jews. Nobody knows for sure why Hitler hated the Jews so deeply, but in speeches and in his book *Mein Kampf* Hitler blamed the Jews for many of Germany's problems. Other Nazis realized that one way of impressing Hitler was to suggest new methods of persecuting the Jews, so from 1933 onwards Jews in Germany were treated more and more badly.