

“ETERNAL
WAR ON
THE
HITLER
YOUTH”

THE EDELWEISS PIRATES
1938-1945



PUBLISHER'S INTRODUCTION

I discovered this interesting bit of history on a web site called *Outlaw History and Theory* (www.charm.net/~clauastro/outlaw/), which examines the practice of illegality among the exploited classes from an anarchist perspective. What drew me to this article was not any sort of knee-jerk liberal antifascism, that gets all warm inside at any talk of resistance to fascism no matter what the source, but rather the description of resistance by youth largely from the exploited classes attacking the domination under which they lived with audacity even when it took the form of a genocidal totalitarian police state of the most extreme form. The actions these youth took were direct action, and in the case of the Edelweiss Pirates, seem to have been largely autonomous. The *Meuten* were apparently connected with communist groups, and I wish the article had gone into differences between the practice of the Pirates and the *Meuten*, since this could have been a fruitful area for practical analysis, but of course an article like this is just a beginning.

To be clear, I am not interested in antifascism by itself. Without a clear revolutionary perspective, the struggle against fascism all too easily degenerates into the struggle for liberal values and the democratic state. Thus, I agree with Alfredo Bonanno's statement: "*I have never liked fascists, nor consequently fascism as a project. For other reasons (but which*

when carefully examined turn out to be the same), I have never liked democratic, liberal, republican, Gaullist, labour, marxist, communist, socialist or any other of those projects. Against them I have always opposed not so much my being anarchist as my being different, and therefore anarchist." I publish this article in that spirit, desiring and working for a struggle against all states, regardless of their political form like that of the Edelweiss Pirates against the Nazi state in Germany between 1938 and 1945.

-Wolfi Landstreicher

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Within months of coming to power in Germany in 1933 the Nazis had effectively smashed what was perceived to be one of the best organized working classes in the world. The Communist and Socialist parties and their trade unions, militias and social organizations had been banned: the activists had been executed, imprisoned, exiled or had gone underground. Working class districts were sealed off and subjected to terror raids and house to house searches.

The Nazi programme of creating a National Community and silencing opposition through the use of terror was to intensify over the next twelve years.

Involvement in the Hitler Youth and National Socialist education policies were intended to ensure that the young became active (or at least passive supporters) of the Nazi state. Behind the propaganda of the 'National Community' the reality, especially in working class areas, was very different. The more the state and the Hitler Youth intruded into the lives of the young, the more clearly visible acts of non-conformity and resistance became.

Thousands of young people declined to take part in the activities of the Hitler Youth and instead formed groups and gangs hostile to the Nazis.

From 1938, until the destruction of the Nazi state, the authorities (especially the Hitler Youth, the police and the Gestapo) became increasingly concerned about the attitudes and activities of 'gangs' of working class youths who were collectively known as 'Edelweiss Pirates'.

The activities of these groups encompassed a whole range of resistance to the regime (absenteeism from work and school, graffiti, illegal leaflets, arguing with authority figures, industrial sabotage and physical violence).

One Edelweiss slogan was "Eternal war on the Hitler Youth". Attacking Hitler Youth hiking and camping groups in the countryside and Hitler Youth patrols and Nazi dignitaries in the towns and cities was a favored activity of Edelweiss Pirate groups.

The activities of many young people were so problematic for the Nazis that the Reich youth leadership were driven to declare "The formation of cliques, i.e. groupings of young people outside the Hitler Youth, was on the increase a few years before the war, and has particularly increased during the war, to such a degree that a serious risk of the political, moral and criminal breakdown of youth must be said to exist." (1942)

It is important to remember that these activities were not taking place under a 'liberal' regime but in the years just before and during the Nazi's total war on 'Bolshevism' and the West and after almost a decade of National Socialist education and propaganda in the schools. The gang members were from the



On the 25th October 1944 the situation was so serious that the national leader of the SS (Heinrich Himmler) issued an ordinance for the 'combating of youth cliques' at the end of a long series of actions aimed at defeating the youth and protest movements.

Apart from 'ringleaders' the Nazis did not execute large numbers of German youths involved in or sympathetic to the Pirates in the way they executed Jews and Poles. This was partly because they didn't know who all of the Pirates were (despite the massive surveillance and repression machinery and volumes of files held by the authorities on known Pirates) and partly because the Pirates were potential workers in armament factories and future soldiers. National Socialist ideological concepts such as the 'healthy stock of German youth' is likely to have also have played a part in the state's response.

Involvement in the Pirates and the Meuten meant that many members moved from non-conformity through to open protest and political resistance against the Nazi state. The history of everyday life in Nazi Germany is often forgotten against the backdrop of the Second World War and successful Nazi propaganda of a nation united behind Nazi ideology. The fact that there was defiance and resistance by thousands should not be forgotten, and the activities of the Edelweiss Pirates and the Meuten, should be of inspiration to anti-fascists everywhere.

generation on which the Nazi system had operated unhindered.

Although most Pirates had no explicit political doctrine, their everyday experience of encounters with National Socialist authority and regimented work and leisure led them into conflict with the Nazis and into anti-Nazi activity.

The group members were almost exclusively working class being mainly unskilled or semi-skilled workers and most members were aged between 14 and 18 years (most males over 18 were conscripted into the army) and had grown up and been educated in schools and homes under National Socialist rule.

The gangs usually consisted of about a dozen young men and (some) women who belonged together because they lived or worked in the same area. The Pirates relied on informal structures of communication for support and "developed a remarkable knack for rewriting the hit songs inserting new lines". The songs often expressed a thirst for freedom and calls to fight the Nazis.

The different groups and their structures arose spontaneously and their understanding of the problems they were facing was formed by the day to day realities of Nazi society. Gang activity revolved around meeting up, socializing, and confronting the regime in different ways.

In the working class districts such as Leipzig, youth gangs emerged in the former red strongholds that, while broadly similar to the Edelweiss Pirates, had a more politicized class identity and drew on the communist and socialist traditions of

their neighborhoods. These gangs were known as 'Meuten' (literally 'Packs').

Gestapo reports on the Leipzig Meuten estimated their numbers at 1500 between 1937 and 1939. The Meuten, probably because of their clearer political position, were subject to more detailed state attention and suffered more massive and ruthless repression than some of the other youth groups.

Reports of brawls with members of the Hitler Youth (especially the disciplinary patrols), of assaults on uniformed personnel, of jeers and insults on Nazi dignitaries, are widespread and documents from the time give a flavor of what was going on.

"I therefore request that the police ensure that this riff-raff is dealt with once and for all. The HJ [Hitler Youth] are taking their lives in their hands when they go out on the streets". (SA Unit report 1941).

"For the past month none of the Leaders of 25/39 Troop has been able to proceed along the Hellweg or Hoffestrasse (southern part) without being subject to abuse from these people. The Leaders are hence unable to visit the parents of Youth members who live in these streets. The Youth themselves, however, are being incited by the so called bundisch (youth movement) youth. They are either failing to turn up for duty or seeking to disrupt it." (Hitler Youth report to the Gestapo 1942).

"It has recently been established that members of the armed forces are to be found among them (the youth gangs), and they exploit their membership of the Wehrmacht to display a particularly arrogant demeanor. There is a suspicion that it is

these youths who have been inscribing the walls of the pedestrian subway... with the slogans 'Down with Hitler', 'The OKW (military high command) is lying', 'medals for murder' and 'Down with Nazi brutality' etc. However often these inscriptions are removed, within a few days new ones appear on the walls again." (National Socialist Party Branch report to the Gestapo 1943).

It appears that the authority's response to the Pirates was confused at the start, some seeing them as "delinquents who would grow out of it". However as confrontations and incidents (and Hitler Youth casualties) increased, the authorities took the situation more seriously and repression of the Pirate groups escalated.

Against the sophisticated terror of the Nazi state the only advantage that the gangs had were their numbers and their ability to retreat into "normal" life. Despite this thousands of Pirates were rounded up in repressive measures which for some ended in the youth concentration camps or public execution.

For example, on the 7 December 1942 the Gestapo broke up twenty-eight (28) groups with a total of some 130 members. However, the activities of the Pirates continued (and in some cases escalated).

The Cologne Pirates had joined an underground group which sheltered army deserters, concentration camp prisoners and forced laborers. They made armed raids on military depots and took part in partisan fighting. The chief of the Cologne Gestapo fell victim to the Pirates in the autumn of 1944. In November 1944 the Nazi's publicly hanged members of the Cologne Edelweiss Pirates.