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“Secular and Christian Youth Associations in Interwar Germany: A comparison of public life and socio-political ideology”

This is a paper on youth organizations in Weimar Germany based on secondary literature as well as on printed and digital material. It deals with central issues regarding those secular youth groups that made up the so-called “youth movement” (“Jugendbewegung”) on the one hand, and the Christian youth organizations on the other; both were nonparty-political kinds of organizations that dominated youth organizational life and practice in the Weimar Republic, albeit in different ways.

Youth in the Weimar Republic, the new German “Reich” as the republic was called, was impressively and variously visible in public life. In the 1920s half of German youth (comprising those between 14 and 25 years of age) belonged to a youth group (whether secular, confessional, political but also athletic or vocational). And in 1932, a year before Hitler rose to power, around five million “youths”,¹ male and female, though principally male, are estimated to have been members of various youth groups. A little less than two out of these five million appear to have belonged to confessional Christian, Catholic as well as Evangelical, youth groups,² and no more than sixty thousand to the so-called “Bündische” (a term that defies translation but points to a “closed circle ... purported to have a meaning in itself”)³ youth, namely to various rather secular, nonparty-political youth groups. The estimated number of members in Catholic and Protestant youth groups are particularly large and very impressive – which is not the case with the “Bündische” youth groups, which made up at best a little more than one percent of the total number of organized German youth in the Weimar period.⁴ And yet the latter was particularly vivid, unique in terms of engagement and diversity, exercising the strongest and widest influence

¹ Peter Stachura, *The German Youth Movement 1900-1945*, London and Basingstoke 1984, 63.

² P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 70.

³ Walter Laqueur, *Young Germany. A History of the German Youth Movement*, New Brunswick and London 2011 (first edition 1962), 135.

⁴ W. Laqueur, *Young Germany*, 32-38; P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 49; Matthias von Hellfeld, *Bündische Jugend und Hitlerjugend. Zur Geschichte von Anpassung und Widerstand 1930-1939*, Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik 1987, 13.

on youth organizations as a whole (including the much more numerous Christian youth groups).

In the following I am going to, first, outline and reflect on the character of the “youth movement”, or “independent youth movement”, independent meaning not associated with a church, a political party, a state or other adult organization in Weimar Germany and the part played by the various groups the movement comprised in social, cultural, political life. Second, to do the same in regard to confessional, Christian youth groups and compare them to the independent “youth movement”, and, third, briefly assess the relations of the above-mentioned youth groups with national socialism and the Nazi dictatorship in the 1930s – the “independent youth movement” of the Weimar period having been regarded by a number of historians as a direct precursor of the national socialist Hitler Youth, and largely responsible for the rise and final success of National Socialism, a view compellingly challenged by other scholars.⁵

1.

Members of German youth groups were on the whole aged between 14 and 25 – and for the most part attended secondary school and were up to 18 years old. Still, young adults, people with full legal rights (even if limited by gender) in the community, in their late twenties, thirties and even forties, did function as the inspiration and informal leaders of youth groups during the interwar period. Different though not distant ages formed a cohort, a social generation in the sense given to the term by the contemporary German sociologist Carl Mannheim,⁶ a band of people who shared or had shared the same fundamental experiences (in our case of the Weimar youth, the consequences of the First World War, the humiliation and generally the ramifications of the Versailles Treaty, and the precarious financial and economic situation of the 1920s) within a limited time span. Besides, in Weimar Germany, faced with structural and conjunctural hardships, a youth cult, which was inherited from the pre-war period as an expression of a rejection of the

⁵ P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 66; Barbara Stambolis, “Jugendbewegung“, EGO (Europäische Geschichte Online), 11, <http://ieg-ego.edu/de/threads/transnationale-bewegungen-und-organisationen/internationale-soziale-bew> (9/4/2015).

⁶ On the theory of generations by Mannheim, see the book by Eysholdt on the German Protestant interwar youth organization “Schülerbibelkreise”: Tilmann Eysholdt, *Evangelische Jugendarbeit zwischen “Jugendpflege” und “Jugendbewegung”. Die deutschen Schülerbibelkreise (BK) von 1919 bis 1924*, Köln 1997, 7-12.

suppression by adults, among other factors, survived and expanded – “Jugend” (“youth”) and “Jugendlichkeit” (“juvenility”) had become, as the German historian Barbara Stambolis notes, seducing “magical words” (“Zauberworte”).⁷ Hope was in demand and it appeared to lie with the young: this was expressed in public speeches, pamphlets, literature, public discourse. Shared fundamental experiences and the concomitant youth cult largely account for this explosion of youth organizations.

The so-called “independent youth movement” was in many respects a child of the late 19th century and the years that preceded the First World War. The interwar movement had its roots in the Wandervogel (“hiking birds”) movement of Wilhelmine Germany. Formed in 1897 by a group of secondary school boys in Steglitz, a town on the outskirts of Berlin, it expanded to northern and central Germany in the following years. It was then that youths, in the sense of non-adults (though they were encouraged by young adults), expressed their need to react against or defy, the power exercised over them by the state, school and parental family, in an authoritarian society that treated youth not as an entity in its own right but as a transitional stage on the road to adulthood. And these were for the most part sons (and to a lesser extent daughters)⁸ of mainly middle-class Protestant families, of civil servants, white-collar workers, professionals or small businessmen. They were sons and daughters (but mainly sons) of the then of the pillars of the (young) imperial Germany.

The social profile of members remained similar in the interwar period (which may partly account for why the youth distanced themselves from the Weimar republic, a point to which I will come back later). But the war and the years to come gave the youth movement new features and finally put it under a new general, fluid label, that of the “Bündische Jugend”, as it was called in public discourse and official documents since 1923.

The use of the term “movement” (which was used in the period under discussion) in the singular does not imply unity. On the contrary: the story of the independent youth is from its start, but especially after the end of the Great War, a story of continuous splits,

⁷ B. Stambolis, „Jugendbewegung“, 6.

⁸ On girls’ organizations and ideologies within the “youth movement” see the book by Rosemarie Schade, *Ein weibliches Utopia. Organisationen und Ideologien der Mädchen und Frauen in der bürgerlichen Jugendbewegung, 1905-1933*, Burg Ludwigstein 1996.



secessions, alliances, reunifications, personal clashes, ideological disputes, the story of short-lived groups. Fragmentation dominated (according to an estimate there were more than 1,200 different groups around 1930),⁹ making it hard or even impossible for historians to gain a complete overview of the movement. Yet there was a genuine will for unity, springing from a common youth identity and expressed in various meetings of different groups that in some cases led to broader alliances: In 1913 for example three thousand members of several “Wandervogel” groups and diverse reformist organizations gathered on the Hohe Meissner, a mountain close to Kassel, in order to discuss the role and the future of the youth movement. A loose federation of the groups present, called “*Free German Youth*” and proclaiming the autonomy of youth, was created¹⁰; it left its mark on the youth movement for a decade (up to 1923), bridging the Wandervogel era with the Weimar era. The “*Deutsche Freischar*”, a relatively large similar federation, including the Wandervogel as well as boy scouts’ organizations (which had seceded from the “*Deutscher Pfafinderbund*” and taken a “bündische” orientation), was the product of similar processes in 1927.

So what the term “movement” reflected was a literally continuous search for ideas, ways of shaping life, self-knowledge through and together with group life, friendship, comradeship and solidarity. “Friendship”, “solidarity”, “comradeship” together with terms like “autonomy”, “independence”, “self definition”, “freedom”, “love for nature” are words that, together with expressions of contempt for the conventional bourgeois way of life, and anti-urban and anti-industrial sentiments, come up regularly in contemporary records, individual or group diaries, proclamations, newspapers, magazines etc. These were the fundamental, neo-romantic values of the “Wandervogel” movement that survived in or were adopted by youth organizations formed in the aftermath of the Great War and during the interwar period. The adjective “free”, which comes up in numerous group names is, as I see it, indicative of the members’ self conception as voluntary, independent collectivities and their belief in the right of youth to follow its own paths – at a time when the German state was, as a result of the Versailles Treaty, in many respects denied the freedom to define itself.

⁹ M. Von Hellfeld, *Bündische Jugend und Hitlerjugend*, 36.

¹⁰ On the Hohe Meissner meeting see W. Laqueur, *Young Germany*, 32-38.

Theoretically at least, individuals were free to express themselves and yet remain members of a collectivity. There was a sort of hierarchy within these organizations, albeit not a strict one: but each organization, like the prewar Wandervogel, had its leaders (“Führer”) and the regional or local groups that constituted this organization had their leaders as well – elected among the members.

Comradeship was expressed and friendship strengthened through a common life away from adults’ supervision: through excursions, rambling, hiking in the countryside, camping, gathering around open fires, playing musical instruments (mostly the lute and guitar), common singing – all practices essentially inherited from the Wandervogel.

The past played an essential part in forging feelings of belonging together and collective identities. Like the Wandervogel, interwar youth “sought solace and inspiration in the past, in an idealized medieval Germany [...] untainted by modern impurities”.¹¹ Meetings often took place in or around medieval/late-medieval castles (Ludwigstein in Hesse, Rothenfels in Bavaria, Altena in present-day North Rhine-Westphalia) or medieval ruins - castles and ruins that today belong to the memory sites of the youth movement. Legends about medieval knights and chivalric orders were narrated and their alleged bravery inspired (male) youth. The neo-romanticism of the Wandervogel, which was emotional rather than intellectual, a non-rational approach to things, a “wandering religiosity”, appear to have survived to a great extent in the interwar period.

Despite continuities between the pre- and postwar youth movement, significant changes took place, especially from the mid-1920s on. Youth groups within the independent youth movement have always been principally male spaces, in terms of membership – but in the 1920s they gradually became, to a much greater extent and in a more clear way, exclusively male youth spaces. Girls’ groups mostly functioned on the margins of male groups and in general;¹² since the early 1920s, girls appear to have been gradually excluded from established youth groups (in which their numbers were negligible in any case) on the grounds that the groups should be gender specific, so that moral dangers are avoided and they function effectively. In April 1920, the Alt-Wandervogel

¹¹ P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 17, 18.

¹² According to a contemporary’s estimate, seventeen thousand girls against sixty thousand boys belonged to the „Bündische Jugend” in the late 1920s and early 1930s: R. Schade, *Ein weibliches Utopia*, 16.

group decided to separate into two parts, a male and a female one; it was characteristically argued that gender segregation gave the “lads” the chance to “become again spiritually more vivid [...] clear in regard to their sex, conscious again of their manly character”.¹³

Masculinity was a central value that was accentuated in the course of the 1920s and the early 1930s. Contemporaries as well as historians refer to a “jungenschaftliche” period of the youth movement after ca. 1925, when sex segregation and exclusively male groups dominated the scene. This went hand in hand with rising militarism (which had some roots in the boy scout tradition) and nationalistic sentiments as well as action. The youth could draw on the militaristic tradition of the boy scouts as well as on the tradition of the early 19th-century German gymnastics (Turnen) movement of Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, a movement associated with rising German nationalism. Strict uniforms came often (though not always) to replace the bohemian clothes – scarfs and hats included – of the Wandervogel, insignia, flags and banners, work settlements and labor camps made their appearance partly replacing rambling and guitars. Expeditions outside the Reich to German ethnic minorities and work on German farms (instead of Polish seasonal migrants, for example) proliferated and in 1925 even a central office for youth work on the border (Mittelstelle für Jugendgrenzlandarbeit) was established.¹⁴

A sort of idealist, humanistic patriotism is indeed obvious in the 1913 Hohe Meissner Declaration where the wish of the “German youth” to become “a refreshing and rejuvenating element of the nation’s spiritual life” was expressed. But in the turbulent interwar period nationalism was often expressed, in discourse and practice, in a much more decisive, though not necessarily aggressive way – the adjective “German” or “Greater German” in a number of groups or group federations, the adjective “national” in some of them [“*Deutschnationaler Jugendbund*”, “*Jungnationaler Bund*” (*JuNaBu*)] is, in my view, quite interesting. Many and more, they understood themselves as “links and bearers of German history”, with a wish to educate the youth to become “original German humans”,¹⁵ like the *Junabu*, a “Bund” which came to life in 1921.

¹³ Werner Kindt (ed.), *Die deutsche Jugendbewegung, 1920-1933. Die bündische Zeit, Quellenschriften*, Düsseldorf, Köln 1974, 47.

¹⁴ P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 49; Schade, *Ein weibliches Utopia*, 146.

¹⁵ W. Kindt, *Die deutsche Jugendbewegung, 1920-1933. Die bündische Zeit*, 489.



Nationalist sentiment, declarations and practices appear to have been on the rise – but still they ranged from humanistic patriotism to racist and thus aggressive nationalism [with an overall anti-Semitism present, which had its roots in the late Wandervogel era (despite the limited number of Jewish members until then),¹⁶ ranging from indifference and exclusion to open anti-Semitic declarations].

Members (or rather leaders) of the independent youth movement generally claimed to be non-political, meaning not attached to any political party. On the whole the interwar youth movement appears at an emotional and practical distance from the Weimar Republic; it appears rather indifferent towards the parliamentary regime (although in 1918 the Free German Youth in Lower Saxony, in northwestern Germany, welcomed the November Revolution and refereed to the “revolutionary middle classes that had to defend the revolution’s results at the side of the proletariat”).¹⁷

True, there appears to have been an active involvement of youth groups (again in the tradition of the Wandervogel) as far as education and educational reform is concerned. Reform pedagogues (such as the famous Gustav Wyneken) acknowledged their debt to the youth movement or had belonged to it – experimental pedagogical ideas deriving from the practices of the youth movement (including the emphasis on gymnastics, physical fitness and sports or school outings) were implemented in a number of specialized institutions after 1918. In the words of Heinrich Roth, “the unique spirit of the youth movement” was “the driving force behind the broad educational reform of the 1920s”.¹⁸

But beyond this, no real interest in the proper functioning of the parliamentary republic is apparent in what youth groups (or rather youth group leaders) wrote and what they did. In fact, in November 1927 in Saxony around nine large youth groups reacted to a Reich Education Bill, declaring among others things that it would “destroy the first attempts for a people’s community (Volksgemeinschaft)” while “the highest duty towards the generation to come is the internal unification of the nation”. They also declared that

¹⁶ P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 29-31.

¹⁷ *Im deutschen Volksstaat. Rundbrief für Freideutsche in Niedersachsen*, 1918, 8, see also P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 39, 40.

¹⁸ P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 54-57.

they “did not want the education of the youth to be an object of party political horse trading (cow trading in German)”.¹⁹

It was not political parties or parliamentary functions that preoccupied leaders but youth and its future, the supposedly classless “Volksgemeinschaft” (ethnic/people’s community), an already powerful myth in 1913,²⁰ the German nation, an individual and yet (contradictory though it may seem) increasingly collective concern. They often acted in an elitist way, they were not much interested in attracting new members (friendship ties were crucial),²¹ they were socially homogeneous (as mentioned above, the great majority came from middle-class families) – and, in the words of Peter Stachura, they “thought of themselves as the avant-garde of a spiritual revolution, which would transform German society”.²² They were the children of a largely fatherless society, raised in their early years with images and principles of an imperial society that the war and its aftermath had torn apart.²³

In terms of ideology and political attitudes, Matthias von Hellfeld discerns three youth group wings in the interwar period. First, there was the idealist wing (like the *Deutsche Freischar* or the much newer *Deutsche Jungenschaft 1.11*) Second, the “völkisch”, usually translated as ethnonationalist, ethnoracialist (for example *Adler und Falken*, *Artamanen*, *die Geusen*), which had roots in the 19th century and placed an emphasis on race. And third, the “national revolutionary” (such as the *Jungnationaler Bund-Deutsche Jungenschaft* or the *Schwarze Jungmannschaft*), of which the latter was the newest (it developed for the most part in the early 1930s) and cooperated, if often temporarily, with national socialism.²⁴ National-populist phrasing and views are to be found in all three [and the legendary “Tusk”, meaning the German, Eberhard Koebel, who

¹⁹ *Jugend zwischen den Kriegen. Eine Sammlung von Aussagen und Dokumenten* Arbeitskreis für Dokumentation des Sachsenkreises München 1967 –[1927, Reichschulgesetzentwurf –The letter was signed by the leaders of the following youth groups: Sächsische Jungenschaft der Deutschen Freischar/ Deutsche Freischar, Gau Sachsen 2/ Deutscher Pfadfinderbund, Landesverband Sachsen/ Bund der Wandervögel e.V., Sachsengau/ Die Fahrenden Gesellen e.V./ Jungdeutsche Zunft/ Kronacher Bund der alten Wandervögel, Sachsengau/Jungnationaler Bund, Gau Sachsen/Wandervogel-Mädchenbund, Gau Sachsen.

²⁰ Internet, *Jugend Deutschland 1918-1945*, Themen, Bündische Jugend, <http://www.jugend1918-1945.de/thema.aspx?s=6357&m=6347&v=6357>, 1.5.2015.

²¹ M. Von Hellfeld, *Bündische Jugend und Hitlerjugend*, 34.

²² P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 49.

²³ M. Von Hellfeld, *Bündische Jugend und Hitlerjugend*, 27.

²⁴ M. Von Hellfeld, *Bündische Jugend und Hitlerjugend*, 37-48.



founded the *Deutsche Jungenschaft* 1.11 in 1929, flirted with National Socialism, before adhering (temporarily) to communism and then ending up in the hands of the Gestapo].

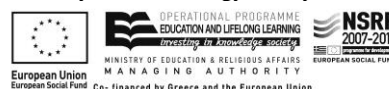
2.

As already mentioned, the Catholic and Evangelical youth organizations in Weimar Germany had many more members than the “Bündische” Youth – each religion had ten times more members in youth groups throughout the 1920s. And yet they were deeply influenced by the youth movement, its ideas and practices, to the point that within the framework of the churches, youth groups were formed which, for some scholars, constitute part of the independent youth movement. This is true in some, but not all, respects – in any case such groups, though a negligible fraction of organized Christian youth as a whole, often proved to be very active and influential, left their mark on Christian youth organizations of the period under consideration and dominate historical accounts.

The War and its aftermath were a watershed in every respect, deeply influencing the Christian churches’ attitudes towards organizing youth and youth organizations. Before the war Protestant churches were generally reluctant to become involved in the organization of the youth – on the eve of the Great War no more than seven percent of Protestant youth aged between 14 and 25 years belonged to a church-sponsored youth group, in contrast with 32 percent of Catholic youth of the same age. The War changed this. “Youth” was the nation’s future. Catholic and Protestant youth groups proliferated, and the influence of the youth movement on them expanded. Considerable parts of Catholic and Protestant (male) youth rejected the functioning of youth groups in the way religious confraternities²⁵ or pietists did. They sought rather to belong to associations, whose members, linked by their Christian/confessional faith, acted autonomously and pursued educational aims.

A basic difference between the so-called independent youth and Christian youth organizations was that the latter were in principle or appeared to be dependent or at least much clearly dependent – on institutions controlled by adults and old generations, namely

²⁵ See *100 Jahre Jugendhaus Düsseldorf. Antworten und Impulse*, 2008, 31.



the churches and their representatives, pastors, priests, theologians. In other words Christian youth organizations were in principle youth tutelage groups.

Both Catholic and Protestant (Evangelical) youth organizations had roots in late 19th-century Wilhelmine Germany (in fact Catholic youth groups date from the 1640s). In 1883, for example, a German equivalent of the popular American-based Protestant Young Men's Christian Association, the “*Christlicher Verein Junger Männer*”, was formed in Berlin,²⁶ to be replaced in the early 1920s by the “*Reichsverband der Evangelischen Jungmännerbünde Deutschlands (Jungmännerwerk)*”. And in 1896, 600 individual Catholic youth groups formed an umbrella organization, the “*Verband der katholischen Jugend und Jungmännervereine Deutschlands*” (VKJJVD) [League of Catholic Youth and Young Men's Associations] – to be replaced in 1921 and on the initiative of a local priest, Carl Mosterts, by another huge cover organization called the “*Katholische Jugend Deutschlands*” (KJD). [Hundreds of thousands of girls were members of Christian youth groups – an “*Evangelical Reich Association of Female Youth*” (*Evangelischer Reichsverband weiblicher Jugend*) was set up in 1893 and in 1921 the “*Central Association of Catholic Girls' Groups of Germany*” (*Zentralverband der katholischen Jungfrauenvereinigungen*) had more than seven hundred thousand members].

However, Catholic and Protestant churches had not been in the same position in Wilhelmine Germany, and this substantially influenced how much and in which ways they valued youth organizations, as well as the ideological-political attitudes of these organizations in Weimar Germany and, consequently towards the Weimar state and its parliamentary democratic regime. With years of discrimination and persecution behind them (let us recall Bismarck's “*Kulturkampf*” through the 1870s), Catholics were potential supporters of the political system that followed the collapse of imperial Germany as a result of the November 1918 revolution. On their part, Protestant churches had been pillars of the pre-war imperial regime and this predisposed them rather negatively towards the Weimar Republic and its real or alleged, supporters, the former “*Reichsfeinde*”, socialists, liberals, Catholics, as they saw it. Later, the basic structure of the Catholic Church, its dependence on a power beyond the boundaries of the German national state (the Vatican), the particularly tight and central way it was organized, its negative experiences from the

²⁶ For an overview of the evolution and the character of the Catholic as well as the Protestant organizations as a whole, see P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 71-85, especially 72,77,79, 80, 81.



early period of the German national state, the concomitant generally defensive and introspective attitudes, all meant an inner resistance (of its organized youth as well) to national socialist seducement.

Church authorities remained to a considerable extent suspicious towards the independent youth movement – which defied authority. This was especially true for the Catholic Church (and in 1914 the Free German Youth was banned for a short period in Catholic Bavaria, accused by a Center Party MP of fostering immorality and disrespect towards parents and school authorities).

In the interwar period not all churchmen agreed in forming youth groups following the example of the independent youth movement – their relation to authority and libertarian principles were much discussed and often rejected. But among them there were those local priests, pastors, theology professors, bishops, who more or less encouraged these tendencies, always emphasizing the primacy of the faith, church membership and Christian identity – adult men in their forties, people like the Berlin university professor and priest Romano Guardini on the Catholic side or pastor Udo Schmidt and Professor and bishop Wilhelm Stählin on the Protestant side. But they accepted youth autonomy on an everyday basis, young leaders (Führer), in regard to the organization of everyday life within a pre-approved context which included rambling, hiking, campfires, singing, expeditions, voluntary labor and increasingly also war games; banners; the carrying, hoisting or lowering flags; parades – and not only reading the bible, taking part in religious rituals, engaging in missionary work, organizing and taking part in pilgrimages.

In contrast to the independent youth movement (where middle-class membership dominated) Christian youth organizations recruited members from all social classes. Yet middle class youth appears to have prevailed in some of the most active among them, especially those who were originally formed as secondary schoolboys' groups – in 1921 almost 90% of those attending secondary schools came from middle-class families.²⁷ On the Catholic side, for example, the “*Quickborn*” (a name taken from northern German town), was founded before the war, in 1909, as a particular secondary schoolboys' group that promoted the cause of abstinence from alcohol and reached 6,500 (male and female)

²⁷ T. Eysholdt, *Evangelische Jugendarbeit zwischen “Jugendpflege” und “Jugendbewegung”*, 3, 4.

members organized in over 500 branches throughout Germany by 1921.²⁸ And on the Protestant side the “*Bund deutscher Bibelkreise*” (founded in 1883 as the “*Bibelkreise für Schüler höherer Lehranstalten*” and renamed in 1929) had about 16,500 (male and female) members in the mid-1920s, most of whom were middle-class schoolboys.²⁹

Catholic as well as Protestant youth groups proliferated in the 1920s. While here there appeared disagreements and different tendencies within the same organization, the church remained a crucial linking bond. Vocabulary and practices often remind those of the *Bündische Jugend*. The notions of Germanness and the need for renovation and regeneration are obvious in many groups’ names (for example, in Catholic *Grossdeutsche Jugend* founded in 1915 or *Neudeutschland* which stood under Jesuit influence, or in Protestant *Bund Christdeutscher Jugend* founded in 1921).³⁰ Some of the names referred to what was seen as a glorious, German and Christian historical past and *Kreuzfahrer* (Crusaders)³¹ could be found on both sides. The youth cult, accompanied with glorification of strength and resoluteness, is reflected in the naming of the Catholic *Sturmschar*, founded in 1929 from parts of other Catholic youth organizations: “*Sturmschar* means something strong and powerful... the Sturm (storm) knows no obstacle, no divergence.”³² There were references to a (new?) German Reich but the meeting of the KJMV in Trier in 1931 took place under the motto “Our notion of the Reich includes the Reich of God, the Reich of Youth, the German Reich”,³³ (which may be seen as a declaration of loyalty to the German state).

Christian youth groups appear to have assimilated the independent youth movement’s mysticism and emotionalism which from the mid-1920s took on stronger nationalistic and militaristic features, reconstructing them (mysticism and emotionalism) through religion. Medieval castles as meeting spaces and the heritage of the Catholic Middle Ages, for example, mystery plays, religious folk songs, rituals and ceremonials,

²⁸ P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 74, 75.

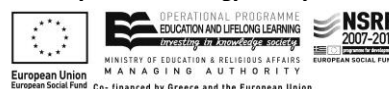
²⁹ P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 82; T. Eysholdt, *Evangelische Jugendarbeit zwischen “Jugendpflege” und “Jugendbewegung”*, 13, 14; see also <http://www.jugend1918-1945.de/thema.aspx?s=5223&m=3443&open=5223> (1.5.2015).

³⁰ P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 76, 77, 83.

³¹ P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 76; <http://www.jugend1918-1945.de/thema.aspx?s=5223&m=3443&open=5223> (1.5.2015).

³² Rundbrief der *Sturmschar*, 1930, 24, in, Johannes Dischinger, “Werden, Zielsetzung und Gliederung der „Sturmschar“”, 31-94, in *Sie hielten stand. Sturmschar im Katholischen Jungmännerverband Deutschlands*, Düsseldorf 1989.

³³ <http://www.jugend1918-1945.de/thema.aspx?s=5250&m=2102&open=5250> (1.5.2015).



played an important part in the emotional and lively piety of the Catholic Quickborn group.³⁴ The “Sturmschar” was under the protection of a military saint, St Michael the Archangel.³⁵ A latent and, in the case of some Protestant youth groups, open militarism become an intrinsic feature of some confessional youth groups’ everyday public life: “The whole Christian youth who gathers here in great numbers plays soldiers every day,” was how one contemporary remarked on the militaristic rituals performed by the schoolboys of the “Bibelkreise”.³⁶ It should be noted however that militarism was related not only to German nationalism but also to boy scout traditions and organization (and boy scout groups, by definition, kept of course international relations) – so there were not only secular but also Christian boy scout youth groups (for example, the Catholic *Pfadfinderschaft St. Georg* or the Protestant *Christliche Pfadfinderschaft*).

Catholic and Protestant youth alike do not appear to have been interested in the state as such, in engaging in preserving and strengthening the Weimar regime. Rather, they saw in Christian and youth collectivities as separate from the state, as something beyond it—although Catholic youth generally voted for the Catholic Centre Party which, despite inner tensions and the party’s enmity towards socialism and communism, was one of the pillars of the Weimar Republic.

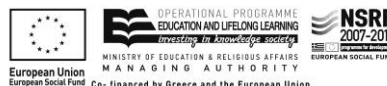
3.

To turn to National Socialism and the Hitler Youth. This organisation, which had little more than a hundred thousand members on the eve of Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, has haunted in many respects the history of the independent as well as the Christian (especially the Protestant) youth movements. The Nazi regime made the Hitler Youth a state youth organisation (Staatsjugend) and systematically, through orders as well as outright terror tactics, dismantled and in many cases directly absorbed secular as well as Protestant youth organizations. Important leaders of secular youth groups (of the *Deutsche Freischar* or the *Schlesische Jungmannschaft*) and the umbrella association of the Protestant youth (following the example of prominent church leaders who supported the Nazi dictatorship) entered the Hitler Youth on their own initiative, a short time after the

³⁴ P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 75.

³⁵ J. Dischinger, “Werden, Zielsetzung und Gliederung”, 47-50.

³⁶ <http://www.jugend1918-1945.de/thema.aspx?s=5223&m=3443&open=5223> (1.5.2015).



March 1933 elections and before a long number of youth groups were officially banned by the “Reichsjugendführung” in November 1933.³⁷ Many Bündische leaders (Führer) attempted to retain their positions as youth leaders within the new regime – they were definitely purged by the mid-1930s. The question of the Bündische youth groups’ or rather their leaders’ responsibility for the ascendance and establishment of the Nazi regime always comes up, in one way or another, in historical accounts. Less so with Christian youth groups, though some did try to survive by finding a way into the Nazi regime at least in the aftermath of Hitler’s rise to power. The leadership of the Evangelical church, which encouraged, if not forced, the integration of the broader Protestant youth organization into the Hitler Youth is a notorious example. But there were deep disagreements in the Evangelical church as well, and a strong anti-Nazi movement developed within it (Bekennende Kirche [Confessing Church]).³⁸ The adult leaders of Catholic youth groups did not espouse National Socialism; Catholic youth groups retained their independence a little longer, due to the concordat signed in July 1933 between Nazi Germany and the Vatican. Still, a comprehensive review of the political views of Catholic Youth published in 1930 showed that the idea of a future greater German Reich was widely favored and anti-Semitism (albeit of a religious type) well present³⁹ in Catholic youth circles (though no one appears to hold Catholic youth responsible, but for its introvertedness and thus for barely opposing national socialism in an energetic way).

Since the late 1980s, scholars of these youth movements have placed emphasis on the need to differentiate, to look into different cases. There was a wide ideological spectrum characterizing the independent youth movement and there were cases of defiance and (rarely) of resistance. We should take into account the changing use and the historicity of terms that look horrific retrospectively (like the greeting form “Heil” widely used by the *Wandervogel* themselves as an unconventional form of greeting⁴⁰ and even the term “Third Reich”, introduced as title of a controversial book by Arthur Moeller van den Bruck in 1923), we should not equate the religious and/or mainly discursively expressed anti-semitism of most groups with the outrightly aggressive national socialist anti-

³⁷ M. Von Hellfeld, *Bündische Jugend und Hitlerjugend*, 79, 80.

³⁸ [http://www.jugend1918-1945.de/thema.aspx?s=3443#!prettyPhoto\[iframe\]/3/](http://www.jugend1918-1945.de/thema.aspx?s=3443#!prettyPhoto[iframe]/3/) (1.5.2015).

³⁹ P. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement*, 78.

⁴⁰ W. Laqueur, *Young Germany*, 16.



semitism (which by no means acquits the so-called moderate expressions of anti-semitism). And of course ethno-nationalist vocabulary, anti-semitic tendencies, militarism and ideas of national superiority existed long before the Bündische youth groups and far beyond them in interwar German society (paramilitary groups). All in all, making the youth movement outright responsible for the Nazi regime is an oversimplification.

Although the *Hitler Youth* adopted many of the externals and practices of the interwar youth organizations (also by simply invading their offices and confiscating materials) it was at the same time openly hostile to the independent youth groups as well as to Catholic youth organizations. As early as in December 1933 there were fears of Bündische domination of the Hitlerjugend: “We responsible leaders are concerned about our national socialist youth movement, its momentum, its revolutionary attitude, its life. We do not want our wonderful movement to fall into the arms of reaction and the old Bünde, we do not want it to get calcified with nice songs and pleasant trips.”⁴¹ In the discourse of the *Hitler's Youth* (or rather in the discourse of its leaders), the Bündische Youth was accused for elitism, individualism and appreciation of pleasure for its own sake. And Catholic youth organizations, who, as mentioned above, survived a little longer, were often accused of conspiring with the communists (even the term Catholic bolshevism was used)!

And yet we cannot understand the later appeal of the Hitlerjugend to young Germans, without taking into account the extensive and elaborate youth organizations of the Weimar era, which made the state youth look familiar to many of those who entered it as well as to their parents.

Looking into the history of the youth movement as well as of Christian youth groups in interwar Germany one realizes, I believe, how vulnerable the Weimar Republic was: It becomes evident at best in the groups' widespread, principal, refusal to engage themselves for its sake – and of course in their dreams of a New Reich, and a New Germany. Such forms of associating and presenting oneself in the public space should be/become an integral part of accounts on Weimar Germany and its road to the Nazi dictatorship.

⁴¹ M. Von Hellfeld, *Bündische Jugend und Hitlerjugend*, 112.