

Michael H. Kater, *Hitler Youth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Can one write a fair and balanced book on any important aspect of the Third Reich given the emotionally charged and hotly contested terrain involved? Certainly Michael Kater makes a strong effort to do just that in his new book on the history of youth in Hitler's Germany. Michael Kater is probably in a better position than almost anyone else in the world to do this since he has already established himself over the past several decades as one of the world's leading authorities on Nazi society, publishing well-regarded studies on Nazi Party membership, jazz and music, medicine, and a variety of other topics crucial to the understanding of how the Third Reich ticked. Arguably, however, none of his former works are of more salience in this regard than this one. Not only was the Nazi movement in many ways a very youthful one, with comparatively young leaders, new ideas, and bold and reckless plans for the future, but its very success depended largely on its ability to capture the hearts and minds of German youth.

According to Kater, the Nazis were highly successful most of the time with the majority of German youths in this endeavor, but not all of the time with all youths. To show this he employs a wide variety of published and unpublished sources, and provides many evocative vignettes along the way of individual German youth in many different types of situations based often on their own memoirs and letters and other personal materials. Thus Kater takes us into the world of the militaristic Hitler youth organization that both German boys in the Hitler Jugend (HJ) and girls in the Bund Deutscher Mädel (BDM) were compelled to join as well as into that of the small minorities of German youth who became involved in resistance organizations such as the working-class Edelweiss Pirates and the more middle-class swing youth and White Rose circle. He also pays attention to both the beginning and largely happier years of the Reich in peacetime during the 1930s, and to the ultimately devastating period of the later war years when the crimes the Reich had committed finally came home to roost and the price that German youths were compelled to pay was enormous.

Fair and balanced as Kater is, he certainly does hold strong views at times. Particularly strong is his disdain for the Hitler Youth organization, which he says was not only militaristic but also imperialistic and anti-Semitic, and which "encouraged individual and group sadism, physical and mental torture, and peer-group hazing" (31), and was in sum "full of incompetence, abuse, and corruption" and was seen by both insiders and many on the outside as well as "corrupt and diseased to the core" (58). Given his fully negative view of this organization, however, which after all was the major Nazi institution for German youth, one wonders how the Nazis were so very successful in gaining the alle-

giance of most German young people. Kater himself does admit that despite its many flaws, the Hitler Youth organization was very popular, by and large, and he provides a number of possible explanations—it provided youth with a sense of freedom from parents and schoolmasters; it was not weighed down by tradition and taboos and was much more modern and forward looking than other institutions; and, probably above all in Kater's depiction, it "allowed liberal relations with girls" (78). While Kater's argument about the sexual dimension of the HJ's popularity might well be true, even though the Nazi youth organization has often been portrayed as rather prim and proper in the past, his account still reads as a blanket condemnation of the Hitler Youth organization and the very negativity of his tone might prevent him from providing an accurate sense of the palpable enthusiasm that so many young Germans obviously felt for the Nazi movement.

But these issues are perhaps still rather minor in comparison with the lengthy discussion Kater provides of the wartime experiences of German youth in his fifth and penultimate chapter. In this chapter especially, Kater tries hard to be fair and balanced. Obviously, however, at this point in time Kater believes that to be fair and balanced the historian needs to recognize not only the crimes that German soldiers and civilians committed during the war but also the suffering that they endured. Indeed, while he pointedly reminds the reader that Germans were responsible for much pain and suffering, he often devotes more space to the pain and suffering of the German soldiers and the German civilians than that of Jews, Russians, and others. In this chapter he dedicates numerous pages, for example, to the hardships and privations of German troops, particularly on the eastern front and to the horrifying if well known mass rapes committed against German girls and women near the war's end by enemy soldiers coming mostly, but not completely, from the east.

Some years ago many scholars would probably not have been very receptive to Kater's insistence that "the chronicle of this suffering must also find its place in the history of youth under Hitler" (240) and many would have been quite uncomfortable even with ostensibly neutral statements like that which Kater makes at the end of his fifth chapter: "In the end, it is impossible to weigh the inhumanities perpetrated by Nazis on the one side and Soviets on the other" (246). Indeed, in the last decades of the twentieth century, the scholarly debate about the Third Reich mostly focused on the issue of the complicity of ordinary Germans in perpetrating mass murder and other crimes. Is it possible that the twenty-first century is already beginning to witness a paradigm shift in the study of German history with Michael Kater out in front of the profession once again?

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