

BEDTIME IN THE THIRD REICH: HOW CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS INDOCTRINATED A GENERATION



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Woods have long been the setting for the stories we read to lull our children to sleep. From the works of the Brothers Grimm to those of Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler, the eerie ambience has both frightened and amazed, capturing the imagination of children for generations. Often, these stories have featured some kind of lurking evil: a wolf, a witch, a Gruffalo – the monsters of the woods we are now accustomed to greeting. But, for the children of the Third Reich, there was another creature waiting in the treeline, one that they were taught to fear – the Jew. Through works such as Ernst Hiemer’s *The Poisonous Mushroom*, the Nazi state primed its youth with distorted constructions of Jewish people, inventions designed to inspire fear and dread. In the opening of Hiemer’s 1938 work, for instance, he compared Jews to the deadly poisonous mushroom: a cause of “misery and distress, illness and death”.² Far from reality, Jews were forged into the “antithesis of ‘Aryan’ humanity” and its greatest threat.³ Such fusion of story and ideology was ever-present in the bedtime stories of the Third Reich. The Party Censorship Office meticulously reviewed all literature to ensure that the contents of children’s works consistently affirmed the principal tenets of Nazism.⁴ Picture books formed a core mode of indoctrination, guiding the young toward the ‘correct’ attitudes and beliefs concerning “party and state”.⁵ In the end, they laid the foundational beliefs that allowed the state to mould its youth into the obedient and silent servants of Adolf Hitler – all this, beginning at “an early age”.⁶

For the Nazi Party, indoctrination involved cultivating several principal characteristics in its youth, the first of which was antisemitism. Antisemitism was a central binding agent of the Third Reich. Relying on prejudices derived from many “profound [points] of ignorance”, the state found an ideal scapegoat to justify its position as a remedial force for the German people to rally behind.⁷ Consequently, much pedagogical propaganda centred on fostering this racially charged hatred. Beyond antisemitism, however, the state also wished to promote deep-rooted loyalty first to Hitler and then to the fatherland. As Nazi elite Rudolf Hess outlined in a 1934 speech, this loyalty was intended to manifest as obedience “for the sake of ... itself”.⁸ What the Third Reich desired was a population ready to mobilise and enact the Führer’s will without question. Thus, the first step was to cultivate a blind loyalty. The final feature that the Third Reich sought to foster in its youth was a militaristic inclination. Intimately attached to the previous goal, the Nazi state intended to expand; hence, they required an army. From childhood, young boys were read stories of camp life and heroic soldiers, designed to generate aspirations that would lead them along the same sacrificial path.⁹ Ultimately, the Third Reich viewed its youth as its most precious resource—the

¹ Christa Kamenetsky, *Children’s Literature in Hitler’s Germany* (London, 1984), p. 51.

² Ernst Hiemer, ‘The Poisonous Mushroom’, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 11 November 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/story2.htm>> [accessed 17 July 2025].

³ Lisa Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany* (Oxford, 2010), p. 58.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵ Kamenetsky, *Children’s Literature*, p. 51.

⁶ Joseph Goebbels, ‘Youth and the War’, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 20 March 2025, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb33.htm>> [accessed 16 June 2025].

⁷ David Welch, *The Third Reich. Politics and Propaganda* (2nd ed., London, 2002), p. 92.

⁸ Rudolf Hess, ‘The Oath to Adolf Hitler’, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 14 July 2020 <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/hess1.htm>> [accessed 16 June 2025].

⁹ Urvashi Gautam, ‘Pedagogical Nazi Propaganda (1939-1945)’ *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 75 (2014), p. 1020.

individuals who would “one day... rule the world”.¹⁰ The early indoctrination of children was therefore deemed vitally important to the state. Through the cultivation of these three traits, they moulded their ideal Nazis: hateful, loyal, and war-ready.

Propaganda was the principal weapon the state employed to manipulate its youth to this end, with techniques that stretched far beyond the confines of picture books. As historian David Welch has noted, the implementation of ideological messages “enveloped ... [the youth] at every stage of development”, casting the long shadow of Nazism over all elements of life.¹¹ In schools, the Jewish question ran “like a red thread” through the curriculum “at every level”.¹² Biology classrooms were transformed into stages for racial science, with family trees designed to help students identify who was Jewish according to the Nuremberg Laws.¹³ Similarly, maths classrooms posed questions written to reiterate Jews’ “alien” status within the Third Reich, reinforcing existing antisemitic beliefs.¹⁴ Beyond school, even play was contoured to perpetuate Nazi ideology. Colouring books, for example, harboured swastikas on every page, with the sandcastles, kites, and cars in Selbstverlag R. E. Heddergott’s book serving as a reminder that every action was done within the confines of National Socialism.¹⁵ Finally, the youth groups of the Third Reich, ranging from the Jungvolk to the Hitlerjugend, expanded across the breadth of the country. With over 5.4 million members of the Hitler Youth alone by 1939, these organisations reached the minds of the youth in their entirety, dominating life apart from school and home.¹⁶ Ultimately, the children of Hitler’s Germany received a total coordination of all elements of life toward their indoctrination. Every component of propaganda was designed to shape and mould them into the desired instruments of the regime.

Welch has rightly argued that much of this propaganda worked through the reiteration of “existing trends and beliefs, to sharpen and focus them”.¹⁷ Indeed, the Third Reich did principally employ reinforcement strategies, often repeating the same antisemitic messages verbatim. There is a significant limitation, however, when applying this reiterative thesis to a history of childhood indoctrination: namely, that, unlike adults, children lack the same pre-existing sets of beliefs to manipulate. Thus, whilst reinforcement, particularly in later stages of schooling, was a dominant technique, child-centric propaganda first had to create the foundational beliefs to exploit. This essay aims to illuminate the methods used to form these baseline assumptions, doing so through a close textual and visual analysis of the children’s picture books of the Third Reich.

Unlike many other forms of media, picture books cross several boundaries of life. Whether read in classrooms or bedrooms, they become staples of childhood experience. Hitler’s Germany mobilised the apparatuses of the state to capitalise on this quality, controlling both supply and distribution. Through the standardisation of schooling under the

¹⁰ Alfons Heck, *A Child of Hitler: Germany in the Days When God Wore A Swastika* (Phoenix, 1985), p. 22.

¹¹ Welch, *Politics and Propaganda*, p. 73.

¹² Fritz Fink, ‘The Jewish Question in Education’, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 20 July 2025, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fink.htm>> [accessed 25 July 2025].

¹³ Gerda Nabe, ‘Image WL14584’, *A is for Adolf: Teaching German Children Nazi Values*, The Wiener Holocaust Library, 28 February 2016, <<https://wienerholocaustlibrary.org/exhibition/a-is-for-adolf-teaching-german-children-nazi-values-2/>> [accessed 17 June 2025].

¹⁴ Gauam, ‘Nazi Propaganda’, p. 1019.

¹⁵ Selbstverlag R. E. Heddergott, ‘Das deutsche Malbuch’, *Books and Pamphlet Collection*, The Wiener Holocaust Library, January 2025, <<https://whlcollections.org/image/14652/1/#topDocAnchor>> [accessed 18 June 2025].

¹⁶ Gautam, ‘Nazi Propaganda’, p. 1018.

¹⁷ Welch, *Politics and Propaganda*, p. 5.

Ministry of Education, a uniform body of readers was distributed to every child of the Third Reich.¹⁸ Moreover, with the substantial printing capacities of the state and private publishers, these materials could be supplied en masse. Texts, such as *Trust No Fox on His Green Heath and No Jew on His Oath* (1936), for instance, were printed over 100,000 times.¹⁹ Thus, the state was able to expose children to a standardised, far-reaching body of propaganda. Beyond the mere logistical imposition, however, even the medium itself was suited for the youth's ideological priming. The blend of picture and word facilitated the application of various, self-reinforcing techniques, enabling the combination of prevalence and unique qualities, which made picture books an optimal vehicle for laying the ideological seeds of Nazism. As such, they provide a valuable lens through which to examine the foundations of the youth's indoctrination.

Traditionally, studies of Nazi propaganda, including Welch's 2002 work, have placed children within the broader context of the German population, giving less attention to the distinctive techniques levied against them. Texts which have illuminated children's unique experiences, such as Lisa Pine's 2010 work, however, have tended to focus exclusively on schooling or camp life. In contrast, this essay takes a narrower focus - analysing picture books - but one that enables a deeper examination of the specific mechanisms in early indoctrination. From a study of iconographic motifs to an assessment of literary techniques and story frames, this essay will reveal the methods used to manipulate a generation. For my primary material, I principally draw from a selection of picture books published by the notorious Nazi publishing house Der Stürmer. These are supplemented by a collection of school readers, broadening the base to cover both state and private publications. This essay will proceed thematically, moving from antisemitism to loyalty and finally to militarism, outlining for each the methods found on the page which began the manipulation of the youth. While these stories were often only the starting point of this corruption, they were ultimately the first dose of ideological poison – the authors of these texts, the true predators of the woods, waiting to ensnare the minds of the young in Hitler's Germany.

ANTISEMITISM: A POISONOUS MUSHROOM

“He is the Devil in Time and remains so through Eternity!”

Ernst Hiemer, *The Poisonous Mushroom* (1938).²⁰

No child is born an antisemite. Scholar Sneha Pan discussed in her 2020 article on Nazi pedagogy how such prejudice is instilled through the careful application of various “pedagogical tools”.²¹ As Alfons Heck's experience of childhood in the Third Reich

¹⁸ Pine, *Education in Germany*, p. 27.

¹⁹ Randall Bytwerk, 'Background of *Trust no Fox on His Green Heath and no Jew on His Oath*', *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 1 August 2023, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fuchs.htm>> [accessed 26 August 2025].

²⁰ Ernst Hiemer, 'Why the Jews Let Themselves Be Baptised', *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 11 November 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/story6.htm>> [accessed 18 June 2025].

²¹ Sneha Pan, 'Breeding Hatred: Dissecting the Pedagogy of Propaganda of Nazi Antisemitism in German Children's Literature', *New Literaria – An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 1: 1 (Aug – Sept 2020), p. 21.

demonstrated, he did not begin his life viewing Jews as “the traitors to Germany”.²² Instead, he readily formed friendships with them, initially allowing him to resist aspects of Nazi ideology.²³ Hence, his antisemitic views were only developed through the strategic mobilisation of the state’s educational apparatuses, leaving him without “the slightest doubt” of his beliefs.²⁴ Picture books were pivotal in instilling these prejudices, offering children stories which first transformed Jews into something to fear. Through the creation of monstrous caricatures, stories laid a foundation that the state could later develop into the vitriolic hatred of antisemitism, their ultimate goal.

One of the first techniques employed by the Nazi state to cultivate fear was to replace the archetypal villains of classic bedtime stories with Jews. Hiemer’s *The Experience of Hans and Else with a Strange Man* is an example of this method, seemingly mimicking the broad arcs of the Brothers Grimm’s *Hansel and Gretel*. Like the classic story, a lurking evil attempts to lure a brother and sister away with the tantalising promise of sweets.²⁵ In the Third Reich’s reconstruction, however, the threat does not come from a wicked witch waiting in a cottage of candy, but from a Jew. Once the protagonist, Hans, realises this detail – that the threatening figure is a Jew - his fear becomes palpable. Immediately, he “[seizes] his sister” and begins to flee.²⁶ The dread was intentionally constructed to show children the appropriate response. For the young readers, Jews were forged into an imminent danger: figures to be feared, threats from which to flee.

Beyond imitative fairy tales, villainous constructions persisted in other narratives, such as Hiemer’s subsequent story, *Inge’s Visit to a Jewish Doctor*. In this tale, the young protagonist, Inge, sits outside the examination room of Dr Bernstein whilst waiting for her appointment. During the wait, however, she begins to overhear the screams of the girl in the room next door: “Doctor! Doctor! Leave me alone”.²⁷ This sparks dread, and when the doctor emerges, we again see a protagonist flee. Here, a role typically associated with care is transformed into something sinister due to the role being filled by a Jew. Like the previous narrative, the reader is falsely presented with a tale of a Jewish individual threatening harm. Notably, these constructions of peril are targeted towards children. It is a choice by the author, designed to inform the young reader that they were the ones at risk.

However, these narrative frames were not working in isolation. The accompanying illustrations were also powerful devices, meticulously crafted to cultivate dread in the hearts of the young readers. In these texts, Jewish people were consistently drawn to possess off-putting qualities. As seen in *Figure 1*, taken from Elvira Bauer’s 1936 *Trust No Fox on His Green Heath And No Jew on His Oath*, the individual is purposefully portrayed as a menacing figure. From the manner of his grip on the woman to the lurching posture, the exaggerated grin, and beady eyes, the character is clearly designed to be intimidating. As Gerhard Paul’s article on Visual History notes, “Images have the ability to ... create realities”.²⁸ Here, they forged in the minds of young readers a new reality of Jews. Instead of simply being people,

²² Heck, *A Child of Hitler*, p. 27.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁵ Ernst Hiemer, ‘The Experience of Hans and Else with a Strange Man’, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 11 November 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/story9.htm>> [accessed 19 June 2025].

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Ernst Hiemer, ‘Inge’s visit to a Jewish Doctor’, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 11 November 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/story10.htm>> [accessed 19 June 2025].

²⁸ Paul Gerhard, ‘Visual History’, *Docupedia Zeigeschichte*, Docupedia, 7 November 2011, <https://docupedia.de/zg/Visual_History_%28english_version%29> [accessed 22 June 2025].



Figure 1: Elvira Bauer, 'Image 12 in *Trust No Fox on His Green Heath And No Jew on His Oath*', *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 1 August 2023, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fuchs.htm>> [accessed 20 June 2025].

possessing portly frames, hunched postures, large noses, and short legs. Few features distinguish the people on the page, thus removing their individuality. In the mind of the reader, therefore, there are no individual Jews, but *the Jew*; this notion of equivalence was designed to allow children's fear to be transferable, their hate mobile.



Figure 2: Elvira Bauer, 'Image 21 in *Trust No Fox on His Green Heath And No Jew on His Oath*', *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 1 August 2023, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fuchs.htm>> [accessed 20 June 2025].

they became luring monsters: dominating, creeping, and unsettling presences across the frames of the page. Alongside the stories themselves, these images were a powerful force of imagining, used to aid the instillation of fear in the children of the Third Reich.

For the state, however, children's fear of the isolated individuals was not enough. In prejudices like antisemitism, hatred had to extend to the entire group. Thus, picture books also attempted to draw equivalences between different individuals, to misinform children that all Jews were fundamentally the same. The first method these books employed was iconographic, wrongly depicting Jews with a shared set of undesirable physical characteristics. The final frame of Bauer's 1936 work (*Figure 2*) perfectly encapsulates this technique. In the image, every individual is moulded in the same manner,

Elements of story also reinforced this narrative of likeness. In Bauer's *The Eternal Jew*, for example, the language constantly enforces the notion of a collective: "From the start the Jew has been ...".²⁹ Not *a* but *the*: the individual defined by their belonging to the group. Picture books not only acted to generate fear, but also to make it transferable. From this foundation, the Nazi state cultivated these emotions, contouring them into the racially charged hatred that children like Alfons Heck came to possess. Fear is a powerful weapon – one that Nazi picture books wielded with great precision. While no child is born an antisemite, when presented with falsified constructions of Jews, moulding them into the monsters of the woods, the path was laid for them.

²⁹ Elvira Bauer, 'The Eternal Jew in *Trust No Fox on His Green Heath and No Jew on His Oath*', *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 1 August 2023 < <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fuchs.htm>> [accessed 12 June 2025].

LOYALTY: HAND IN HAND FOR THE FATHERLAND

“Those who have the youth on their side control the future”.

Hans Schemm, *Leader of the Nazi Teachers League*.³⁰

Beyond antisemitism, the Third Reich also instilled in its youth a deep-set loyalty to the Führer and the fatherland. Obedience was the desired effect of this devotion. As many Hitler Youth quotation posters emphasised, the purpose of leadership roles was never

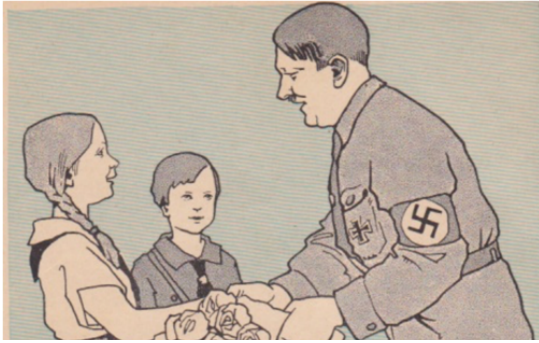


Figure 3: Otto Zimmermann, ‘Mein Führer! In Hand in Hand For the Fatherland’, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 4 December 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/textbook05.htm>> [accessed 28 June 2025].

command, but service.³¹ All instruction was to be done in the context of Adolf Hitler. As one poster, published in May of 1940, stated: “Let each ask himself of his acts: What would the Führer say about that?”³² With the Third Reich seeking a Nazified future for Germany, the youth had to be obedient to its desires. They not only had to be prepared to kill, but to die for the fatherland: they had to be not just loyal, but blindly so. Within this context, picture books played a significant role in luring children deeper into the forest of Nazism, cultivating the beginnings of this devotion through several interlocking methods. These began through fostering parallel emotions, such as love, which were later moulded into the desired reception of Adolf Hitler.

Developing this loyalty began by first moulding the Führer into a paternal figure, caring and kind. In texts such as Otto Zimmermann’s 1936 *Hand in Hand for the Fatherland*, the fusion of parent and Führer was overt. While two children presented Hitler with a bouquet, they began expounding their love for him, a love of a specific quality: I “love you as I do my father and mother”, I am “obedient to you as I am to my father and mother”.³³ The construction of these lines by Zimmermann was purposeful, designed to bring Hitler closer to the reader. Instead of being a distant leader, he was portrayed as having a connection to children equivalent to that of parents. In normal circumstances, the warm love of a mother or father would be distinct from the fanatic love of a leader, but here, they were fused. The implication for young readers was that they should view the Führer as a guardian figure – someone who, whilst proxemically distant, was as close to them emotionally as their immediate family. The sense of personal attachment was further developed through phrases such as “You will hold our banners”.³⁴ The collective ‘our’ unifies Hitler and the children into

³⁰ Gautam, ‘Nazi Propaganda’, p. 1018.

³¹ ‘Hitler Youth Quotation Posters. 34/1940: 28 October – 3 November’, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 4 December 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/hj-wochenparole.htm>> [accessed 27 June, 2025].

³² ‘Hitler Youth Quotation Posters. 13/1940: 27 May – 1 June’, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 4 December 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/hj-wochenparole.htm>> [accessed 27 June, 2025].

³³ Otto Zimmermann, ‘Mein Führer! In Hand in Hand For the Fatherland’, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 4 December 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/textbook05.htm>> [accessed 28 June 2025].

³⁴ *Ibid.*

a shared partnership. Particularly given the accompanying image (*Figure 3*), which only contains three figures, there is a sense of intimacy and connection. Thus, picture books like Zimmermann's laid a foundation of paternalism and the perception of a close relationship to the Führer. It afforded young readers scripts for how to interpret this relation: a close one, a warm one.

As children moved through the educational apparatus of the Third Reich, Hitler was gradually transformed into a god-like figure. Through the careful application of pedagogical messaging, his image was moulded such that he surpassed "any normal level of trust" as a leader.³⁵ Textbooks, such as Philipp Bouhler's, for instance, were laden with religious metaphor to entice children into accepting his authority. In one passage, he instructed children that "the only way to understand the miracle" of Germany's recovery was to know that Hitler "first believed in [its] ... resurrection".³⁶ Here, he becomes the central mover, shifting something from impossibility to possibility. As historian Randall Bytwerk has noted, these strains of propaganda transformed National Socialism into a quasi-religious cult.³⁷ Yet, this devotion to a god-like entity was grounded and strengthened by the notion of paternalism. Thus, tragically, when young soldiers went to die for their Führer, their sacrificial inclination was emboldened by the sense of attachment founded in the literature of their youth.



Figure 4: Elvira Bauer, 'Image 20 in *Trust No Fox on His Green Heath And No Jew on His Oath*', *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 1 August 2023, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fuchs.htm>> [accessed 20 June 2025].

Loyalty towards Hitler, however, was mirrored and amplified through a devotion to the German people, creating a broader web of allegiance. In cultivating a sense of belonging, it afforded children something to protect, particularly given how the state manipulated the impression of threat. One of the first techniques applied to create a sense of belonging was the use of collective language. The young readers were persistently included within the German collectives of the stories. "Our banners wave before us", a quote from Zimmermann's 1936 work, is a prime example of this method.³⁸ "Let us march: Tromp, tromp, tromp" carries the same effect.³⁹ Here, the uses of 'our' and 'us' invite the youth into a pre-existing unit. Moreover, the accompanying art, particularly for 'Aryan' children, enforced the notion that these were their people. In *Figure 4*, taken from Bauer's 1936 work, the members of the Hitler

³⁵ Welch, *Politics and Propaganda*, p. 107.

³⁶ Philipp Bouhler, 'The Battle for Germany. Conclusion: The Victory of Faith', *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 8 March 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/bouhlerc.htm>> [accessed 30 June 2025].

³⁷ Randall L. Bytwerk, *Bending Spines. The Propagandas of Nazi Germany and the German Democratic Republic* (New York, 2004), p. 14.

³⁸ Otto Zimmermann, 'The Youth Marches and Sings in *Hand in Hand For the Fatherland*', *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 4 December 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/textbook05.htm>> [accessed 28 June 2025].

³⁹ Otto Zimmermann, 'Boys become Soldiers in *Hand in Hand For the Fatherland*', *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 4 December 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/textbook05.htm>> [accessed 28 June 2025].

Youth are all illustrated with the archetypal blond hair and blue eyes, as well as in homogenising uniforms. Here, they are a collective, alike not just in Germanness, but in their appearance – a manifestation of their interconnectedness.



Figure 5: Elvira Bauer, 'Image 2 in *Trust No Fox on His Green Heath And No Jew on His Oath*', *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 1 August 2023, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fuchs.htm>> [accessed 20 June 2025].

Moreover, children's sense of belonging was strengthened by making group inclusion desirable. Bauer's work, *Trust No Fox ...* for instance, goes to great lengths to enforce the positive attributes of the German population. According to her text, these were "proud [people] ... Able to work and able to fight ... fine big [chaps]".⁴⁰ Such presentations encouraged readers to actively want to be part of the in-group, rather than sit in passive inclusion: the youth were meant to feel proud of their membership. Once again, images furthered this sentiment. In *Figure 5*, the Aryan is presented in a far more favourable light than the Jewish man. Instead of having a hunched, portly figure, the German man stands tall and muscular. Thus, as children were asked which group they would rather belong to, German desirability was furthered, with readers clearly enticed to choose the latter.

A sense of belonging, however, was not the final goal for the Third Reich; they desired loyalty and service. To transition this sentiment of community into action, the state weaponised a sense of danger. Through lines in works such as *The Poisonous Mushroom*, readers were taught that the enemies of the state, Jews, were not only threats to "a whole family" but to "an entire Volk" (people).⁴¹ Thus, the desirable community was portrayed as under threat, an impression exploited to call the youth to service: "If we do not kill the Jewish poisonous serpent, it will kill us".⁴² Involvement was a necessity of survival. To further incentivise participation, however, picture books also consistently sought to reward desirable action. For instance, when Hans saves his sister Else from a Jew, he is praised as "a brave lad" and receives a "large piece of chocolate".⁴³ Consequently, not only did children's stories lay the foundations of a loyal youth by inviting them into a desirable community, but they also did so by making it one under threat. Through the manipulation of danger and love, both devotion and service were encouraged, as well as the obedience that Hitler required.

⁴⁰ Bauer, 'The Eternal Jew'.

⁴¹ Hiemer, 'The Poisonous Mushroom'.

⁴² Ernst Hiemer, 'The Poisonous Serpent in *The Poodle-Pug-Dachshund-Pinscher*', *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 4 December 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/ww2era.htm>> [accessed 17 June 2025].

⁴³ Hiemer, 'The experience of Hans and Else'.

MILITARISM: GOOD COMRADES

“A fine horse,
A shining weapon
And a wooden sword
What more could one want?”

Otto Zimmermann, *Hand in Hand for the Fatherland* (1936).⁴⁴

Historian Ian Kershaw has rightly noted that the ultimate purpose of propaganda in the Third Reich was to ready its people for war.⁴⁵ Fostering inward loyalty and cultivating a hatred toward Germany's enemies was all part of a broader scheme, intended to mould a population willing to fight for its nation. In the end, the youth were the most receptive to these messages, showing “a tragic loyalty” to their “Führer, Volk, and fatherland” till the war’s close in 1945.⁴⁶ From their early years, picture books laid a foundation of militancy. Primarily through school readers, the state sanitised war’s brutal realities, presenting it instead through idealised depictions reflective of heroic sagas. Moreover, they encouraged participation in the youth groups of the Third Reich, organisations that acted as sites of military manipulation. Through mimicking camp structures, they readied children for war. As prolific Nazi educator, Rudolf Benze, stated, “Camps allowed for the ‘deep capture of the whole person’” – the creation of the soldier.⁴⁷ Alfons Heck’s experience perfectly illustrates this sentiment: recalling when 160 members of his troop were marched “into an ice-cold river in November”, he noted how not one refused.⁴⁸ This was the blind obedience the Third Reich desired and the effect of the Hitler Youth. Thus, bedtime stories lured children, like victims to the woods, into the mechanisms of their indoctrination. Through several techniques, a foundation was laid for a self-sacrificing youth – one who would give their lives for their Führer, Volk, and fatherland.

Ultimately, in these texts, war was portrayed in specific lights to give it an alluring quality. One notable feature was its sanitisation; instead of something horrific, it was cast as innately enjoyable. In works such as *My Reader*, the narrator stated how, when no one attacked their position, “there was no fun”.⁴⁹ The disappointment was palpable and carefully crafted to encourage readers to view war in a positive light. Far from brutal, it became a kind of game; something without stakes, as play often is for a child, utterly devoid of the trauma of conflict. In a striking contrast to the realities of PTSD, the *Primer for the Württemberg Public School* contained the jarring statement: “He can talk about the war”.⁵⁰ In a single line, war became normalised, removed from its traumatic, life-changing actuality. Thus, through

⁴⁴ Otto Zimmermann, ‘Hand in Hand For the Fatherland’, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 4 December 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/textbook05.htm>> [accessed 28 June 2025].

⁴⁵ Ian Kershaw, ‘How Effective was Nazi Propaganda?’, David Welch (ed.), *Nazi Propaganda, The Power and the Limitations* (London, 1983), p. 182.

⁴⁶ David Welch, ‘Educational Film Propaganda and the Nazi Youth’, David Welch (ed.), *Nazi Propaganda, The Power and the Limitations* (London, 1983), p. 85.

⁴⁷ Kershaw, ‘How Effective was Propaganda’, p. 186.

⁴⁸ Heck, *A Child of Hitler*, p. 34.

⁴⁹ Fritz Gansberg, ‘The enemy in *My Reader*’, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 4 December 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/textbook04.htm>> [accessed 29 June 2025].

⁵⁰ ‘Our Army in *Primer for the Württemberg Public School*’, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 4 December 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/textbk03.htm>> [accessed 29 June 2025].

sanitisation, children were able to latch on to the purported positives of war, idolising conflict, and gradually taking on the misguided notions the Third Reich sought to instil in them.

In these tales, soldiers were consistently placed in contexts of idolisation, making the role appear innately desirable. Often, these frames centred around parades or marches, both events of spectacle and excitement. *The S.A. Marches* in Gansberg's *My Reader* is a prime example of this technique. Here, Hansi and his friends desperately tried to see the soldiers as they “tromp, tromp, [tromped]” by, even climbing on boxes to catch a brief glimpse.⁵¹ In the end, the success was only fleeting due to the “many people standing along the street”.⁵² The excitement in the text, however, was ever-present; the effort the children displayed was carefully engineered to create the impression of eagerness, informing the reader that the march was something special. Moreover, it is notable that the perspective characters are again children. It presents readers with models to emulate, scripts to copy, cultivating the idolisation the state wished to foster.



Figure 6: Otto Zimmermann, ‘The Jungvolk!’ In *Hand in Hand For the Fatherland*, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 4 December 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/textbook05.htm>> [accessed 28 June 2025].

Glorification was also extended, however, to the structures below the military, to the youth groups of the Third Reich. The intent here was to attract them to the mechanisms that would funnel them into the militaristic lifestyle the state wanted. Desires to participate, held by the protagonists, were often explicitly stated. In *The Day of the Youth*, for instance, Karl openly expressed his want to march, just like his older brother in the Hitlerjugend.⁵³ Similar notions were echoed in *My Reader*, where an early story ended with the line “I want to be one of them ... when I’m bigger”.⁵⁴ These texts thus constantly reiterated that being a part of these groups was something desirable. Such explicit endorsement of military emulation displayed the regime’s unambiguous intention: to transform youthful idolisation into action through camp life”.

The desirability of these groups, however, was further increased through the suggestion of community. Senses of belonging are powerful incentives, and these texts ingrained narratives of support to weaponise this. In Gansberg’s *My Reader*, for instance, when young Otto begins limping, he is immediately assisted by “two good comrades”.⁵⁵ The implication is that no member is alone. Similar messages can be drawn from the accompanying images of Zimmermann’s *The Jungvolk!* (Figure 6). Here, we see children playing together, unified in attire and company – no one alone. Thus, readers were given the impression that to join was to belong. Ultimately, these relations were not limited to the youth

⁵¹ Fritz Gansberg, ‘The S.A. Marches in *My Reader*’, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 4 December 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/textbook04.htm>> [accessed 29 June 2025].

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ ‘The Day of the Youth in *Primer for the Württemberg Public School*’, *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 4 December 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/textbk03.htm>> [accessed 29 June 2025].

⁵⁴ Gansberg, ‘My reader’.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

organisations of the Third Reich: the language of these texts equally enveloped them within the larger military missions of the state.

Zimmermann's *Hand in Hand for the Fatherland* has many statements that forward this sentiment of lateral participation. "There's the enemy! Go get them!! ... Get going", for instance, constructed the youth's mobilisation as something vitally important.⁵⁶ The string of imperatives conveys that they were an essential part of the Nazi mission, with urgency in their actions. Moreover, beyond a sense of importance, such stories also gave children a way to emulate their heroes. Soldiers fought. Through joining these youth groups, you could do the same. Via these techniques, the streams into the militaristic side of the Third Reich were made intrinsically desirable. Not only were they constructed as places of community, but also as locales of emulation—powerful incentives to lure children into the woods of ideology while bearing sharpened sticks. But, as Alfons Heck's testimony demonstrated, the realities were far more brutal; camps were not places of play, but places of pain, of plunges into icy rivers, and gruelling marches. The state's incentives were never to foster camaraderie for the sake of youthful enjoyment, but rather militaristic success. As Rudolf Benz commented, activities centred around the group because the group was "the decisive level of action" in the military setting.⁵⁷ Boys were armed, for the glory of the Third Reich, from their early development; that was the goal, and the seeds of this were found in the very texts which lulled them to sleep.

CLOSING THE BOOK: A TOTAL COORDINATION

"From that moment on, I belonged to Adolf Hitler body and soul".

Alfons Heck, *A Child of Hitler*.⁵⁸

Ultimately, picture books were weaponised in the Third Reich to lay the ideological foundations of Nazism. Not every child reacted to these propagandistic messages in the same way; as historian Sarah Maza has noted, historical writing can "flatten out group psychologies", limiting its utility.⁵⁹ Consequently, it is necessary to note that among the youth, pockets of resistance did exist. From the *Swing Youth* to the *Edelweiss Pirates*, young people pushed back against aspects of Nazi ideology, breathing plurality into the reception.⁶⁰ In the end, however, such resistance was minimal. The resounding weight of the ideological materials in Hitler's Germany left the majority of the youth scarred. Maza acknowledges that when particularly traumatic or vivid experiences mark a generation, it is possible to write a unified history of their experiences.⁶¹ This is one such instance.

In the Third Reich, every element of children's lives was coordinated toward their social engineering. Through the mobilisation of story, whether to paternalise or sanitise, the blend of image and word sent the youth down a desired, predetermined path. Antisemitism, loyalty, and militarism were all principal tenets of the state; to secure a Nazified future, they sought to ingrain them in the youth. Lisa Pine has highlighted how the mechanisms of

⁵⁶ Otto Zimmermann, 'The Jungvolk! in *Hand in Hand For the Fatherland*', *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 4 December 2024, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/textbook05.htm>> [accessed 28 June 2025].

⁵⁷ Kiran Patel, 'Education, Schooling, and Camps', Shelley Baranowski, Armin Nolzen, Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann (ed.), *A Companion to Nazi Germany* (London, 2018), p. 186.

⁵⁸ Heck, *A Child of Hitler*, p. 23.

⁵⁹ Sarah Maza, 'The Kids Aren't All Right: Historians and the Problem of Childhood', *American Journal of Ophthalmology* 125: 4 (October 2020), p. 1270.

⁶⁰ Welch, *Politics and Propaganda*, p. 78.

⁶¹ Maza, 'The Problem of Childhood', p. 1270.

Hitler's Germany constantly moved the "individual to the requirements of the state".⁶² Through this process, children's "personal development needs" were disregarded.⁶³ In the end, the Nazi state sought to forge its youth not in violent flames, but in the quiet setting of a bedroom, a night light on as they were lulled to sleep – the starting assumptions whispered in near-silent words.

A REFLECTION: FROM THEN TO NOW

"Fake news"

President Donald J. Trump.

Today, we are yet to depart from the political engineering of children's literature. In Dana Loesch's 2021 picture book, *Paws Off My Cannon*, for instance, young readers are presented with a narrative designed to homogenise immigrant populations, which moulds them into threats. Pictorially, unlike the inhabitants of 'Freedom Island', a stand-in for the U.S.A., where each individual is depicted as a distinct creature, the invading immigrants are all reduced to hyenas.⁶⁴ As in Bauer's work, this technique defines identity through a belonging to the collective, making any views transferable. More worrying, however, is the active encouragement of violence. As the title suggests, Loesch's 'solution' is armament. Consequently, children are not only presented with an allegorical tale that encourages a one-sided view of immigrants, but also one which fosters aggression. Thus, just as the twisted stories of the Third Reich shaped its youth, today's children are equally navigating a world infused with mistruths.

Ultimately, the political application of misinformation and disinformation to sway the public remains a dominant part of our lives and one that extends far beyond the confines of picture books. From the moment we wake to the moment we sleep, we are bombarded with contradictory opinions, leaving little room to process what we hear. Particularly in this digital age, the validity of claims have become increasingly difficult to discern. Something that has only been worsened in recent years by those in positions of political authority, trivialising truth. Officials, such as U.S. President Donald J. Trump, for instance, have famously met unwelcome reports with the label "fake news".⁶⁵ Through this invalidation of official news outlets in favour of alternative platforms, like *Truth Social*, the suitability of claims to a particular outlook has come to take precedence over reality, and our ability to trust sources has been diminished. In one statement from the 2024 presidential election, President Trump claimed that immigrants were "eating the dogs ... eating the cats".⁶⁶ Much like the caricatured depictions of Jewish people in the picture books of the Third Reich, this fabricated imagery was applied to demonise; whilst false, the claim's usefulness within his narrative frame made it, in his mind, acceptable. Hence, while the political and historical contexts remain vastly different, the continuity of rhetorical mechanisms to 'other' demonstrates a concerning trend—one, where today's perception of fact has become something malleable – something weaponised.

⁶² Pine, *Education in Germany*, p. 3.

⁶³ Hamida Bosmajian, 'Censorship and Mythmaking in Nazi Germany', *Children's Literature* 14 (1986), p. 171.

⁶⁴ Dana Loesch, 'Paws Off My Cannon (Freedom Island)' (Texas, 2021).

⁶⁵ Welch, *Politics and Propaganda*, p. 1

⁶⁶ Riley Hoffman, 'READ: Harris-Trump presidential debate transcript', *ABC News*, ABC News, 11/09/2024, <<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/harris-trump-presidential-debate-transcript/story?id=113560542>> [accessed 10 August 2025].

This is the environment in which today's children are growing up: one of binaries where fact and falsehood are manipulated for persuasion, a setting where groups compete to attract individuals to their perspective and dismiss any others as unfounded. Within these binaries, critical engagement and nuance are lost - all or nothing. This has only been worsened by the nature of online algorithms, which trap the youth in cycles of reinforcing content. In these digital spaces, from YouTube to social media, recommendations are based on previously viewed material. Thus, we often find ourselves receiving limited genres of information, stuck in self-perpetuating filter bubbles. This is problematic when we get caught in echo chambers of political beliefs, never encountering different views or opinions. Here, children are trained without contradiction to accept one worldview as "correct" and all others as false, without nuance or consideration.

The danger of this style reinforcement was raised in historian Daniel Feldman's discussion of Hiemer's *The Poisonous Mushroom*. Like these echo chambers, each character in this text was already privy to the structures of knowledge the Nazi's wished to forward. For instance, when one mother asked her son if he knew who the poisonous mushrooms were, he readily replied, "Of course I know ... They are the Jews".⁶⁷ As such, there were no views in these stories outside the remit of Nazified knowledge, leaving the reader without the "possibility for doubt ... or critical engagement".⁶⁸ Online echo chambers carry this same effect, and as *The Council of Europe* has noted, the youth are particularly vulnerable to these strains of propaganda, given the centrality of "communications technology in their lives".⁶⁹ It leaves them intellectually ill-equipped to distinguish truth from falsehood, everything part of one mind. Moreover, they often lack the temperament to hear others' views and engage in constructive discussion, as the mental scripts are absent due to the nature of online media.

Thus, histories of childhood indoctrination act as potent warnings for our contemporary world. The Third Reich exemplifies the totalised effect of early priming on the youth, particularly in contexts where a limited set of views are expounded. There, through the weaponisation of picture books, the foundations were laid for an intensely loyal, militant, and antisemitic youth. Children were transformed in the quiet spaces of bedrooms, where today's youth now sit on their phones. Hitler's Germany was rooted in print; today, it comes from the digital, where algorithms shape perceptions and beliefs by offering a singular path into the woods. While the tools may differ, young minds remain equally at risk to the weaponisation of pedagogical strategies. Today's context is not comparable in scale or severity to the ideological engineering in the Third Reich, but any emerging structural similarities must be observed and noted. Hate is ultimately evolutionary – it rarely begins with violence; rather, it originates from the basic fractures in human interaction. The risk of escalation is ever-present, and the human cost must be remembered. When we exist in echo chambers, we forget how to communicate with those around us – a dangerous result.

⁶⁷ Hiemer, 'The Poisonous Mushroom'.

⁶⁸ Daniel Feldman, 'Reading Poison: Science and Story in Nazi Children's Propaganda', *Children's Literature in Education* 53 (2022), p. 208

⁶⁹ 'Dealing with propaganda, misinformation and fake news', *Free to Speak- Safe to Learn. Democratic Schools for All*, Council of Europe, 2019, <<https://www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/dealing-with-propaganda-misinformation-and-fake-news>> [10 August 2025].

EPILOGUE: THE HUMAN COST

“Until Easter, I was a Protestant, then they found out that my father was a Jew, and so I became one... No one would be friends with me”.

Jewish Child's Letter in 'Child Victims of the New Germany'
Lady Violet Bonham-Carter.⁷⁰

This is the testimony of a young boy, classified as a Jew by the Third Reich. From the moment he was prescribed this identity, those around him viewed him differently. It is a stark reminder that while the vitriolic hatred of prejudice can manifest in significant acts – book burnings, a Night of Broken Glass, the Holocaust – it first exists in these quieter moments. The exclusion of a classmate, the dismissal of a friend. Through these microcosms of hate, the seeds of the larger acts are sown. Again, it rarely begins with violence; instead, it starts with a word – perhaps one found in a picture book, perhaps one found on a screen. From there, it is a slow, creeping path into the woods, taken one step at a time.

⁷⁰ Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, 'Child Victims of the New Germany: A Protest', *Books and Pamphlet Collection*, The Wiener Holocaust Library, January 2025, <<https://whlcollections.org/image/75612/3/-/>> [accessed 18 June 2025].

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