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Behind the Benign: Reading and Contextualizing a Photograph of Girls Playing Recorders

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Good afternoon everyone! I thank the program committee for the opportunity to speak. My presentation today concerns the irony that arises from the dissonance between a delightful photograph of children making music and the more sinister implications of its caption. I suggest that it evokes the beginning stage of the imposition of a malignant ideology upon an unsuspecting group of children, using their natural eagerness to make music together. We must look behind the benign. Music is one of the lures.

From time to time I acquire, for my library’s special collections, musical rarities and collectibles. In the winter of 2012 I requested the purchase of this 7 ½ x 9 inch photograph from Schubertiade Music, a vendor of such items located near Boston, Massachusetts.

As you can see, the photo shows eleven girls, similarly attired in plain and simple dresses, hiking down a grassy hillside on a summer day. They are playing recorders. They appear to be about ten or eleven years old. An older girl wearing a light blouse and dark skirt, perhaps a teenager or young adult, brings up the rear of this musical procession. The children are very intently concentrating on their fingers, suggesting that they are quite new to their instruments. From the position of their feet and legs in stop-motion they are carefully walking or marching in-step.
One might speculate that perhaps they are in an after-school music club, out for a musical hike, under the watchful shepherding of the older girl at the back, while being confidently led down the hill by one of their peers. Perhaps they are playing a folksong, or even a march.

The graphic items in Schubertiade’s catalog for Winter 2012 included over a dozen items related in some way to Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich. In the case of this photo, the connection is revealed on the reverse, where we see the penciled annotation, in English, “Hitler Youth – 1933.” No photographer’s name appears. Although Mr. Gabriel Boyers of Schubertiade was unable to supply any additional provenance for this photo, as you can see, the reverse bears traces of its previous inclusion in the Culver Pictures Collection, a commercial archive of historical photographs, where it had been cataloged as illustrating life in the Third Reich.

Returning to the photo itself, it is clear that there are no obvious Nazi symbols or insignia, no Hitler youth uniforms, no flags with swastikas, iron crosses or German eagles, no Nazi salutes. Rather, the girls, happily playing their recorders, create a benign and innocent scene that could have occurred anywhere, anytime.
This dissonance between the pleasant image and its ominous caption is problematic. If the caption is accurate, it illustrates a convergence of (1st) the popularity of hiking and music-making in the German youth movements of the 1920s and 30s, (2nd) the great popularity of the recorder as a folk instrument (which was already being adopted by music educator Carl Orff and his collaborator Gunild Keetman), and (3rd) the purposeful control and ideological propagandizing of German children by Nazi leadership, taking advantage of childhood’s idealism, adventurousness, and desire for camaraderie.

After the passage of eight decades, we can (4th) retrospectively construct and attach a portentous meaning that was not necessarily intended by the unknown photographer, one that is ominously significant as we project a future for the subjects.

After a rapid rise to power over a span of less than ten years, from incarceration in prison for treason to election as Chancellor in 1933, Adolph Hitler immediately began his long-planned transformation of the country into one where Aryan racial supremacists would attempt military domination of the entire continent, and perhaps the world, along with the simultaneous subordination, or elimination, of ethnic, genetic, and sociopolitical undesirables. His implementation of a radical vision of a thousand-year empire prompted the Second World War and ultimately resulted in tremendous loss of life both on and off the battlefield, including the genocide of 6 million Jews as well as the mass-murder of 5 million non-Jews. Remember the year of his ascent, 1933, while I turn our attention briefly to the more pleasant topics related to the photograph.
The Germany of the early 20th century gave rise to a remarkably widespread Jugendsbewegung, or Youth Movement. Diverse groups of young people, reacting to a stifling rigidity of family and society and to the grim cheerlessness of life in industrial cities, found freedom in outdoor activities, in a return to nature, and in a revival of older folk traditions. They eagerly formed into clubs for this purpose. Some manifestations of this urge were the more free-form, loosely-knit Wandervogel (literally “wander-birds”) or hiking clubs, the camping- and outdoors- oriented Pfadfinderbund (“pathfinder” league), and the more structured boy and girl Scouting organizations with their uniforms, achievements, and ranks. The Catholic and Lutheran churches also sponsored youth groups, as did many trade associations and even political parties. These organizations existed before and after World War I. While some Wandervogel groups were leftist, and some Pfadfinder groups were conservative, most participants were generally apolitical but nonetheless shared a sense that their immediate elders had failed them, and that they must rediscover their older, genuinely German folk roots. Additionally, what they had in common was an affinity for sports and physical exercise, for enjoying the outdoors, for camping in tents away from the cities, and for socializing through folk dancing and singing songs around the campfire. They also shared a sometimes vague, but othertimes well-considered, conviction that the idealism of their own youth culture would somehow create a better future. In many cases the leadership figures at the basic unit level were young adults or even teenagers, themselves not much older than their charges.
We see here pictures of Wandervogel above and Pfadfinderen below. Uniforms and orderliness were important to the conservative, scouting-related groups, while the free-spirited Wandervogel sometimes preferred to... remove their clothing when out in nature! I resisted the urge to show a photo of naked Wandervogel.

I turn now to a discussion of the popularity of the recorder during the period in question.

The use of the recorder as an orchestra and chamber-music instrument waned and nearly disappeared after the Baroque period with the subsequent development of the flute, but several versions remained popular in European folk music and domestic music-making. Whether called recorders, flageolets, fipple flutes, or even czakans made from walking sticks, these sometimes primitive instruments were played for fun by children and adults outside the realm of art music until the early-music revival of Englishman Arnold Dolmetsch at the beginning of the 20th century. Even as sophisticated musicological interest in early art music and its instruments by scholars and professionals spread to Germany, a more populist recorder revival began there at the same time. This alternate revival was led by musician and string-instrument-maker Peter Harlan in the 1920s. Harlan was a participant in the Wandervogel movement, and in this spirit he had a rather carefree approach that sought an uncomplicated, easy-to-learn instrument, suitable for folk music, that would bring common people—the Volk—together. In fact he seemed rather suspicious of professional music training for this purpose, and felt that a more
authentic voice of the Volk could be heard in the crude recorder; in his words “whose sound could not be enhanced…whose essence could not be altered by virtuosity.” He obtained the support of the Prussian government to determine the feasibility of using recorders as school instruments, and by 1925 under his leadership a recorder-manufacturing industry began. Whereas Germany’s dire post-war economic situation precluded most families from owning a piano, the recorder was affordable to everyone, and was widely distributed to schools. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, the most common instruments used by the various youth groups for both indoor and outdoor activities were guitars, lutes, accordions, and, for melody… recorders! To summarize, it appears that there were simultaneous “highbrow” and “lowbrow” recorder revivals.

I will later make a connection between recorders and the work of influential German music educators Carl Orff and Gunild Keetman during this time; first, we must describe the establishment of Hitler Youth organizations and their importance in the advancement of the National Socialist agenda.

[Read from screen] In 1933 Hitler declared: “I am beginning with the young. We older ones are used up… we are bearing the burden of a humiliating past…. But my magnificent youngsters! …What material! With them I can make a new world.”

Hitler was very shrewd in understanding that the control and indoctrination of youth was critical to the remaking of Germany to fit his imperial vision.
The Hitlerjugend, or Hitler Youth, began in 1926 as a National-Socialist organization for teenage boys and numbered about 5,000 members. It rapidly grew in membership as the party itself grew in membership and influence. In June, 1933, as an integral component of his grand coordination of all government programs to control as many aspects of national life as possible, new Chancellor Adolf Hitler organized Hitler Youth into four sections and banned, outright, all other youth groups. Whereas before this action there were around 100,000 Hitler youth, by the end of 1933 there were over 2 million, and by the end of 1936, when membership became compulsory, there were over 5 million. He appointed Baldur von Schirach as the head of Hitler Youth; this man reported directly to Hitler, bypassing other party and government officials, which made his position essentially a cabinet-level office, and illustrated the immense importance that Hitler attached to control of the youth.

There were four main divisions, two for boys and two for girls: the Deutsches Jungvolk (DJ) for younger boys, the Hitlerjugend for teen boys (HJ), the Jungmadelbund (JM) for younger girls, and the Bund Deutscher Madel (BDM) for teen girls. Inasmuch as the girls in my photograph appear to be 10 or 11 years old, let us concentrate on the JM, or “young girls.” Even at this tender age, upon joining and maybe not fully understanding the nature of their commitment, they must swear to worship Hitler and even die for him.
Membership was open only to “ethnically-pure” German girls whose parentage could survive close scrutiny; no “undesirables” were allowed, including those with mixed racial or ethnic ancestry, those with diseases or physical or developmental impairments, and those whose parents were politically suspect, such as Bolsheviks. Their responsibility will be to attend meetings two or three times a week in which recreational activities and instruction in home economics will be mixed with lectures on German-Aryan racial supremacy and, especially, the girls' future duty to be healthy and loyal wives to German soldiers, and to bear sons who will in turn become soldiers for the Reich. An important part of the rhetoric of Nazi supremacy was to instill disdain for non-Aryans and fealty to Hitler’s vision of global domination.

Among the most popular activities were overnight camping away from home on weekends, competing in sports, and sharing musical activities such as singing, dancing, and playing instruments. While some girls later admitted to finding the Nazi lectures boring and tolerated them distractedly, others found them inspiring (which made these girls future leadership material). Troops of JM were regularly called upon to march in rallies or to go door-to-door soliciting donations for charitable causes. What most attracted them to membership were the fun, excitement, and camaraderie of socializing with other girls, away from parents, doing things that formerly only boys were allowed to do.

The 10- or 11-year-olds were recruited in April, the month of Hitler’s birthday, and formally “confirmed” as members in October. At some point during the intervening months, each girl had to pass a Jungmädelprobe, or series of
challenges, that tested bravery and physical fitness. After passing these challenges, the October confirmation ceremony included the awarding of JM’s black neckerchief with brown braided leather knot; henceforth these will be proudly worn as part of their distinctive uniforms.

This topic of uniforms is crucial to interpreting my photograph.

It is fairly easy to find many photos of Hitler youth on the internet. Usually they can be distinctively identified by the uniforms they wear and by various Nazi symbols that surround them or which decorate the places where they assemble. Jungmadel wear junior versions of the uniforms worn by their older sisters in the BDM. The warm-weather uniform included a white blouse, the important black neckerchief with brown braided leather knot mentioned previously, and a blue pleated skirt. A local unit insignia was worn as a patch on the left shoulder. Certain shoes and stockings were also specified, and hair was to be worn in two braids. Wearing this uniform was encouraged at meetings and required at all public events in which the troop participated. Note that in the photo on the right, a small group of young girls is being drilled by an older girl from the BDM. I rather enjoy the muted smirk on the face of the cutie at the end of the row, which suggests that she does not take this standing at attention very seriously!
The photo at upper-right shows three older girls and a Jungmädel chatting in a park as they take the small children in their care out for an afternoon stroll. Childcare was a typical form of public service performed for working parents, and the girls’ appearance here in uniform may have been for publicity purposes. The picture at lower left shows JM in the town of Worms participating in a march in support of German border expansion—the banner reads “Grenzlandnot ist Volksnot” or “borderland need is the people’s need.” Here and there in the ranks we notice that not all the JMs are in uniform. These would likely be the newest recruits who have not yet passed the Jungmädelprobe, and signed the official pledge, that entitled them to wear it.

I return to the subject of recorder playing. Photographs of Hitler Youth playing musical instruments are numerous. In addition to the cliché photographs of boys blowing horns and beating drums in Nazi parades, many can be found that show the girls of JM and BDM making music. The upper photo, from a large collection of Hitler Youth images at the University of North Texas shows a performance by Jungmadel with recorders during a program of some kind.

The lower photo is taken from a book published in Berlin in 1937 entitled So Sind Wir: Jungmädel Erzählen, or So We Are: Jungmädel Stories. It consists of several short stories, written at about a 12-year-old’s reading level, that emphasize
the fun and fellowship of being a JM. This picture, showing two young girls with their leader seated on the grass outside a tent, appears with the anecdotal story “Helga und ihre Blockflöte” or “Helga and her Recorder.” Young Helga earnestly desires to learn to play the recorder with her friend in the JM unit, but her parents won’t let her practice at home because of the noise! Instead, she learns the recorder at the friend’s home, and soon plays a duet at a formal JM “Elternabend” or parents’ evening. Mom and Dad are so very proud that Helga ends the story by confidently asking them for an alto recorder for Christmas! I presume such stories were eagerly read by JM or were perhaps even read aloud at their gatherings.

I should not speak about children, music, and recorder-playing in the Germany of the 1930s without mentioning Carl Orff and his brilliant colleague Gunild Keetman. Allow me to go off on a brief tangent and introduce here a sidebar.

Sidebar: Carl Orff, Gunild Keetman, Recorders, and the Nazis
- Composer Orff and musician/dancer Keetman contributed to the prestige of Güntherschule: music, movement, dance
- Keetman learns to play the recorder and applies it to work with children
- To remain in their posts they must become Nazi – perhaps “in name only”
- They, and millions of other Germans, had to go through the public motions of loyalty to survive
- Non-participation or non-conformity were risky; opposition and resistance were futile

Orff and Keetman were both associated with dancer Dorothee Günther’s innovative Güntherschule, an academy where young women explored and integrated the arts of music, movement and dance as creators, practitioners, and teachers. Both the creative performance activities, and the innovative educational methods, that originated here were admired throughout Europe, and would eventually result, after the war, in the music pedagogy known as the Orff Schulwerk. Keetman, a classical cellist and gamba player who had branched out into dance and choreography, noted the widespread popularity of the lowly recorder, ordered a set of them, taught herself
to play, and realized that these small, easily-handled instruments, that could be played while moving and even dancing, would be an excellent lyrical complement to the drums and pitched percussion instruments that Orff was using with children.

Being associated with such a prestigious institution as the Güntherschule was not possible without Nazi party membership. To keep her school and faculty intact, Dorothee Günther actually paid for Keetman’s membership, but the latter, who despised the Nazis, never even bothered to pick up her membership card, a valuable item of identification, or to formally register with a local chapter. Eventually the party revoked her membership for non-attendance, but by that time Keetman had become too important as an artistic figure to be removed from the Güntherschule, which was now a national cultural treasure and valuable for propaganda purposes. When in public, Orff and Keetman had to go through the motions of the “Heil Hitler” salute just like everyone else, but this gesture was apparently forbidden on the grounds of the Güntherschule. In the 1930s one might reveal one’s true concerns and fears about the authoritarian government and ideology that dominated Germany only to trusted friends in private. But public nonconformity and nonparticipation were risky, and open opposition or resistance to the regime was increasingly futile—such people disappeared.

This photo, copied from a book about Keetman that is rich with reminiscences, shows her with her orchestra of young recorder players performing her “Procession and Round Dance of the Children” before 100,000 people at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Showcasing German
talent before the world was part of the Nazi’s propagandistic use of music and the arts. This performance was part of a magnificent Olympic spectacle calculated to mask the regime’s racist and militarist policies that lurked behind the benign. Unseen in this photo, a troupe of young dancers interpreted this music on the grass in front of the orchestra. Several decades later, one of those young dancers, become a grown woman in her 40s, visited Keetman and was able to whistle the melodies from memory. Both agreed that this had been a transcendent event, and Keetman added that this Olympiad was Germany’s last great moment; everything went rapidly downhill afterwards.

With this poignant post-war exchange between Keetman and her new acquaintance, I’ll leave this grainy photo our Fraulein and her recorder players, and return to my photograph and its problem.

It is possible that the annotation on the back of the photograph is incorrect. However, I believe that the very specificity of the year—1933—suggests that the unknown annotator, or his informant, had some degree of confidence about this, or even first-hand knowledge of the circumstances. This was the year in which all other youth groups were outlawed. Although the girls marching down the hillside, intently playing their tune, do not wear the outward trappings of the Jungmadelbund, perhaps it is because they haven’t yet earned the right to wear the uniform. If before June, 1933 they were merely an after-school music club, after this date there will be no other youth
groups. To be involved in any kind of organized youth activity is to be involved with Hitler Youth.

Even if the unknown photographer merely intended to document a charming scene of youthful music-making, the later annotation that identifies the girls as Hitler Youth is either accurate and ironic, or sarcastic and ironic. In either case, it invites my retrospective contextualization of the photograph that gives the outwardly musical subject an ominous meaning at odds with its charm, as we project a bleak and troubled future for these girls: one that rises and falls, emotionally and socially. In 1939, when they are 16, the war will start. How exciting—we are winning—our Leader is a genius! In 1945 when they are 22, the war is over. How bleak—we have lost—our Leader was a madman! The annotation “Hitler Youth 1933” also invites us to read its message as cautionary: our children are so very malleable, and with the lure of music and dancing, fun and fellowship, they can fall under the spell of leaders with nefarious, malignant intentions.

I pointed out that our girls with the recorders will likely have an at-first-exciting, then-bleak future. I will go a step further. What about the girls who are NOT in the photograph… the undesirables who were not “pure” Germans, or who were crippled, or who were Jewish, or
whose parents were politically incorrect? Who were not allowed to join the Jungmädelbund? Unless they can escape, for many of them there will be NO future.

We must never forget.

I again thank you for your kind attention to my speculation about this photograph. I will be happy to take questions and hear comments.