

What was the league of German girls?

After Hitler came to power, he highlighted the importance of the youth outside the classroom.¹ By 1930, the Nazis attempted to organise girls in the Third Reich by the section of the Hitler Youth: the League of German Girls, *Bund deutscher Mädchen*.² The BdM was seen as the third educational organization in society. Dagmar Reese suggests that its purpose was to educate female German youth in the ideals of the National Socialist.³ However, memoirs from previous BdM members show that the purpose of the league was to give young girls opportunities in different organised indoor and outdoor activities that took up most of their waking hours, and also offer opportunities in job training. In contrast, due to the war, the purpose of the BdM changed to prepare girls for their future roles as mothers and housewives. In 1938, Belief and Beauty Society – *Glaube und Schönheit* – was established for women aged eighteen to twenty-one because the programme for the BdM was not suitable for the older girls in order to educate them to be mothers.

German girls entered the Hitler Youth from the age of ten because according to Balder von Schirach, this marked the end of childhood.⁴ They spent the first four years in the Young Girls, *Jungmädel*, after which they moved on to the League of German Girls proper, *Bund deutscher Mädchen*. Again, girls were involved in this league for four years and finally they joined another BdM body called Faith and Beauty.⁵ All the groups were under direct

¹ Matthew Stibbe, *Women in the Third Reich* (London: Arnold, 2003), p. 110.

² Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi society* (London: Croom Helm, 1975), p. 3.

³ Dagmar Reese, translated by William Templer, *Growing up female in Nazi Germany*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), p. 21.

⁴ Reese, p. 22.

⁵ Ute Frevert, translated by Stuart McKinnon-Evans in association with Terry Bond and Barbara Norden, *Women in German history: From bourgeois emancipation to sexual liberation* (Published: Oxford: Berg, 1988), p. 243.

control of von Schirach who was also in charge of the Hitler Youth.⁶ After 1933, membership of the BdM was voluntary. The number of girls joining the group grew rapidly, especially when comparing it the number of boys entering the HJ.⁷

‘The BdM, directed, educated, steered and prepared girls away from certain occupations and encouraged them in others’.⁸ Anson Rabinbach and Sander Gilman claim that the BdM prepared young girls for their future roles as mothers and wives.⁹ Chris Crawford suggests that this was done by involving the girls in programmes and activities that were for the good of the people, which included collecting for the Winter Relief or helping with the harvest.¹⁰ The young girls were also taught skills in bed-making whilst expected to remain honourably pure, clean and serious.¹¹ In contrast, Uta Frevert suggests that no BdM group referred to settling down in a home. Frevert goes as far to claim that little attention was paid to Hitler’s statement that one day all girls would grow up to be mothers and care for their husband.¹² Instead, the BdM offered girls distinct training courses and conferences that taught them how to hold position of responsibility.¹³ Therefore the BdM taught girls how to look after themselves as well as preparing them for domestic and motherly tasks. However, preparation for motherhood was low on the list of priorities for the league.¹⁴

Dr. Jutta Rüdiger was the highest leader of the BdM who was the national speaker of the group from 1937 to 1945. Von Schirach allowed Rüdiger and the other leaders of the BdM to control their own group without interfering,¹⁵ but offering advice when needed.

⁶ Chris Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: The Early Years* (2011) <<http://www.bdmhistory.com/research/history.html>> [accessed 12 December 2013].

⁷ Stibble, p. 113.

⁸ Frevert, p. 241.

⁹ ‘Educating the Race,’ *The Third Reich sourcebook*, ed. by Anson Rabinbach and Sander Gilman (Berkeley), p. 245.

¹⁰ Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: The Years 1932 until 1945*.

¹¹ Richard Grunberger, *A Social History of the Third Reich* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p. 278.

¹² Frevert, p. 245.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 243.

¹⁴ Stibble, p. 116.

¹⁵ Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: The Early Years*.

Rüdiger stated in an interview what the purpose of the BdM was to her and other BdM leaders. The league gave girls a number of opportunities that were not available to them previously, such as teaching them to look after themselves whilst openly advertising jobs and job training to help them in the future.¹⁶ ‘We in the League were determined that every girl should be able to stand on her own feet, whether she was married or not’.¹⁷ This statement is useful because it shows that the BdM was not all about teaching the young girls about their future as mothers and wives but it gave them other opportunities and skills, therefore direct reference to home and family life in the education of girls had little significance. This source is also useful because it shows that the leaders of the BdM, including Rüdiger, educated the German girls in their own interest and that of the country. Conversely, the problem that lies within this source is its clarity, regarding *when* Rüdiger stated this. If it was before 1936, this was what the BdM offered German girls, however, if Rüdiger announced this after 1936 when the HJ announced that the BdM would change its format, it shows that the leaders had a different perspective on what the role of women should be and did not agree with the Nazi ideologies.

Frau Ursula Meyer-Semlies, an ordinary German woman, recalled her childhood and youth in Germany during the Third Reich in two books. The purpose of her memoir was to capture her memories in the BdM and to show that there was a diversity of different women’s experiences.¹⁸ The memoir is useful because it shows that the BdM was not all about teaching German girls how to be a perfect housewife and mother, but there was more to it. ‘We sang a lot... a lot of folk songs’.¹⁹ It is also useful because it shows that the BdM was not always used to indoctrinate the youth into the Nazi ideas and beliefs. ‘And really not so much about

¹⁶ Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: The Early Years*.

¹⁷ Johannes Steinhoff, Peter Pechel, Dennis Showalter, *Voices from the Third Reich: an oral history*, 1st Da Capo Press ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), pp. 19–20.

¹⁸ Alison Owing, *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 57.

¹⁹ Owing, p. 57.

National Socialisms'.²⁰ This makes one question whether the Nazi party knew exactly what was going on in the BdM, if they supported it, or whether they were content that despite some of the activities, it was preparing girls to accept rules, develop a sense of national identity and belonging to a uniformed organisation.

The BdM offered German girls a number of opportunities in a variety of activities, summer camps, and sports. Matthew Stibble proposes that the BdM gave the German girls an opportunity to take part in out-of-school activities.²¹ When weather permitted, the *Jungmädel* and the BdM girls participated in ball games, running, camping, bicycle rides, sport competitions, and hiking trips to visit major rivers in Germany and the countryside. The hiking trips sometimes included overnight stays in youth hostels and hotels.²² The BdM also offered girls a chance to attend summer camps, which Crawford claims gave girls the opportunity to spend time with friends away from their family, from school and to meet others their own age with similar interests. Camp also gave girls the chance to participate in new things and to see new places.²³ Geoff Layton proposes that the league offered opportunities that were not previously heard of during the Third Reich, especially for poorer families.²⁴ During the Third Reich and before, it was also unheard of for young girls to attend trips and holidays without their parents for an extended period of time.²⁵ The idea of sports, camping, hiking, singing and music excited a number of girls, especially those from poorer backgrounds. Therefore, the BdM gave German girls new opportunities and a number of activities and sports that they could participate in.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Stibble, p. 114.

²² Frevert, pp. 244–245.

²³ Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: Peacetime activities* (2011) <http://www.bdmhistory.com/research/peacetime.html> [accessed 13 December 2013].

²⁴ Geoff Layton, *Germany: The Third Reich 1933-45* (London: Hodder education, 2005), p. 65.

²⁵ Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: The Years 1932 until 1945* (2011) <http://www.bdmhistory.com/research/history.html> [accessed 12 December 2013].

Ute Frevert proposes that the BdM also provided the youth an opportunity of escape from the restrictions and responsibilities that characterized female socialisation, giving them a short duration of freedom.²⁶ Stibble argues that the youth groups before 1939 were a way in which the young people could express themselves freely, in ways that had not been open in previous generations.²⁷

Renate Finckh, a BdM member from the age of ten onwards, recalls why she joined the league in an interview in an edited book by Charles Schüddekopf 'Im Gespräch mit Heike Mundzeck,' Schüddekopf, *Der alltägliche Faschismus. Frauen im Dritten Reich*.²⁸ The purpose of this interview was that Finckh wanted to tell her own story of how the evil Nazi party inspired her so deeply to join. Finckh claims she joined because she felt lonely and wanted to feel part of something. 'At home no one really had time for me'.²⁹ This source is useful because it shows what the BdM could offer the girls that joined new friendship and a sense of purpose and belonging.³⁰ 'I finally found an emotional home, a safe refuge, and shortly thereafter also a space in which I was valued'.³¹ Gerda Zorn also claims while writing about her years in the BdM that she joined the league for the need of friendship. This statement is useful because it suggests that Gerda Zorn joined the BdM because she wanted to feel the excitement and to enjoy the friendship and the activities that the BdM offered. She did not join because she agreed with the regime's ideologies and beliefs.³²

Each BdM group in different towns and cities had to meet at least twice a week in two types of meetings. One meeting was called *Heimatabend*, social evening. This was held at a local community centre or in a room of the local National-Socialist Party building on a

²⁶ Frevert, p. 244.

²⁷ Stibble, p. 116.

²⁸ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the fatherland: women, the family, and Nazi politics* (New York: St.Martin's Press, 1987), pp. 194-95.

²⁹ Koonz, pp. 194-195.

³⁰ Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 275.

³¹ Koonz, pp. 194-195.

³² Ibid. p. 194.

Saturday afternoon or evening, which was led by a group leader, who was an older girl. It was largely up to the group leader what the duration of the meeting entailed; most of the groups sang and participated in the arts and crafts. In contrast, there was also a required curriculum of political lessons.³³ The girls participated in memorizing information about Hitler and all the verses of the Deutschland and Horst Wessel Song, an outline map of Germany and the importance and details of the Treaty of Versailles.³⁴ Layton proposes that the BdM as well as the other youth organizations emphasised on political indoctrination, highlighting the life and achievements of Hitler and German loyalty.³⁵

Ruth Reibnagel states in a memoir what exactly the social evenings were. The purpose of this source is to give her side of the story, what she experienced and can remember, which details the BdM teaching the girls about the ideologies and beliefs of the Nazis – It was not all about fun, games and participating in different activities. It is evident from Reibnagel's memoir that the BdM did have a political purpose. Reibnagel states 'During our meetings, two or three of the older girls who were leaders taught us about the ideals and beliefs of national socialism'.³⁶ The political lessons also highlighted Germany's success.³⁷ A memoir is useful to a historian because it is first-hand information. Historical monographs and photographs can only provide so much information, whereas memoirs extend that information.³⁸ The evidence provided in this memoir supports the BdM as a league that indoctrinated the German girls into the Nazis success whilst highlighting the importance of Germany.

³³ Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: The Years 1932 until 1945* <<http://www.bdmhistory.com/research/history.html>> [accessed 12 December 2013].

³⁴ Grunberger, p. 278.

³⁵ Layton, p. 63.

³⁶ Ruth Reibnagel, translated by Chris Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: The Jungmädel* (2011) <<http://www.bdmhistory.com/research/narratives.html>> [accessed 16 December 2013].

³⁷ Reibnagel, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: The Jungmädel*.

³⁸ Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (2011) <<http://www.bdmhistory.com/research/narratives.html>> [accessed 16 December 2013].

However, many girls did not pay attention when the social evenings turned to politics. Crawford argues that a number of members believed that these lessons were dull but something they had to sit through,³⁹ highlighting that the BdM was not a completely effective way of indoctrinating the youth into the regimes beliefs. Ursula Dickreuther, also a former member of the BdM claims, 'Of course we also had to go through some political lessons, but we just suffered through those. I never actually felt indoctrinated,'⁴⁰ supporting the BdM as an organisation that offered social activities, as opposed to Nazi indoctrination.

The second meeting involved sports, which were separate from the social evenings, taking place in the afternoon, normally on a Wednesday and were under the observation of local leaders. Girls took part in gymnastic, athletics (which included track and field), and they played games.⁴¹ Crawford suggests that physical training did not play an important role in the BdM when comparing it to the male HJ. However, regular sports were still part of the programme.⁴²

Reese argues that in 1936, the structure of the BdM changed due to the Hitler Youth Law, which stated that the BdM should educate and shape the German youth, physically and mentally with the ideologies of Nazi party.⁴³ Girls were to be taught domestic science, domestic economics, and caring for their children whilst serving the nation and their community.⁴⁴ Hitler stated at a speech at the youth rally in Berlin on May 1st 1936 that the BdM should educate German girls into strong and brave women. 'And you in the BdM educate the girls – make them for me into strong brave women'. The Reich Youth leader also claimed that the purpose of the BdM was to change and develop girls into champions of the

³⁹ Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: The Years 1932 until 1945*.

⁴⁰ Ursula Dickreuther, translated by Chris Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: The League of German Girls* (2011) <<http://www.bdmhistory.com/research/narratives.html>> [accessed 16 December 2013].

⁴¹ Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: The Years 1932 until 1945*.

⁴² Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: Peacetime activities*.

⁴³ Reese, p. 36.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 37.

Nazi worldview.⁴⁵ Consequently, due to the Hitler Youth Law, towards the end of the 1930s, a number of feminine activities were added to the BdM programme. However, Arno Klönne argues that the organization for women, which taught the skills of a housewife and a devoted mother and wife, did not change its structure and teachings until the end of 1930s.⁴⁶

In contrast, Crawford proposes that due to the war, the programme for the BdM changed once again.⁴⁷ Also, by March 1939, membership of the HJ groups became compulsory, which included the BdM.⁴⁸ Reese also argues that during the war, the meaning of the HJ disappeared.⁴⁹ A schedule about the wartime work of the Hitler Youth was established, giving the members of the HJ and BdM ideas of what they could do to help the war. When the local BdM groups met, they spent their hours writing letters to soldiers, making care packages, knitting wool gloves, ear warmers, and socks for the soldiers at the front. They also made straw slippers for the wounded troops. The German girls welcomed soldiers home from the front, or soldiers that were going off to war, with hot coffee or fresh sandwiches.⁵⁰ Helga Brachmann, a former member of the BdM, recalls her memories in the BdM in 1938. The fact that she is writing about her experience in the BdM in 1938 gives us an estimate date of when she joined. The purpose of her memoir was that she wanted to explain to the younger generation who had not experienced the war what the BdM was and why she joined. Brachmann proposes that she and other girls in her group performed old folk songs to wounded soldiers during the war.⁵¹ Historians can use this source to compare it to other BdM memoirs before the war to witness the evolution of the league's role. However,

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 41.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 4.

⁴⁷ Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: Wartime Activities* < <http://www.bdmhistory.com/research/wartime.html> > [accessed 13 December 2013].

⁴⁸ Stibble, p. 114.

⁴⁹ Reese, p. 40.

⁵⁰ Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: Wartime Activities*.

⁵¹ Helga Brachmann, translated by Chris Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: Why We Need Oral History* (2011) <<http://www.bdmhistory.com/research/narratives.html>> [accessed 16 December 2013].

the limitation of this source is that it does not state exactly when it was written and does not go into great detail about the activities during the war. During the war, The BdM changed their activities to helping the soldiers at the front or who came home wounded.

In 1937, there was discussion over what should be done with German girls between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one. Therefore Faith and Beauty that established on January 19th 1938 under the leadership of Dr. Rüdiger. Reese claims that Faith and Beauty replaced the traditional service in the BdM. Reese strengthens her argument by stating that the creations of the groups were established in order to take the needs of women into greater account.⁵² Günter Kaufmann's speech about Faith and Beauty suggests why the group was established and what it included. However, the weakness with Kaufmann's speech is that it does not give a date. Kaufmann states that the educational programme that is applied to the young girls in the BdM organisation cannot be applied to older girls, aged seventeen to twenty-one. The BdM is only appropriate for girls age ten to eighteen.⁵³ 'The camping trips and campsites cannot accommodate the goals that have been set by the new BdM programme for girls in this age group: Faith and Beauty'.⁵⁴ Crawford argues that Faith and Beauty was established because the National Socialist believed that the older girls should be given an opportunity to continue or begin their unique talents and interests, while furthering their educations accordingly that would lead to a strong and healthy lifestyle for themselves and their families.⁵⁵

There were three categories in the society. The first was sports activities such as gymnastics, in order to guarantee a healthy body and pure mind.⁵⁶ 'Personal life skills' was the second category, which included home duties such as cooking, sewing and choosing the

⁵² Reese, p. 38.

⁵³ 'Educating the Race,' pp. 262–263.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: The Belief and Beauty Society* (2011) <<http://www.bdmhistory.com/research/gands.html>> [access 22 December 2013].

⁵⁶ Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: The Belief and Beauty Society*.

correct furniture. Crawford claims that personal life skills taught young women the basic skills and information for their future roles as housewives and mothers. The third group concentrated on education, which included arts, music and politics. The league also paid attention to fashion and how women were expected to dress.⁵⁷ However, the society also placed a high significance on job training by helping girls find professions that were suitable for them.⁵⁸ Faith and Beauty included a variety of activities that would help shape young German women into their future roles as mothers.

To conclude, the National Socialist Party established the BdM in order to educate German girls in their future roles as mothers and housewives by offering them practical and domestic skills. However, memoirs from former members of the BdM and previous BdM leader Rüdiger show that the purpose of the BdM was to give girls an opportunity that was not previously heard of in a variety of activities, summer camps and sports. The BdM also offered girls job training and job skills because former BdM leaders believed that women should be able to look after themselves. However, in 1936, the Hitler Youth Law stated that the BdM should educate the girls into the Nazi beliefs. Therefore feminine activities were added to the BdM programme. Also in 1938, Belief and Beauty Society was established for older German girls because the Nazis believed that the activities in the BdM were not acceptable for the roles of the older girls, who were being prepared for their future roles as mothers and housewives.

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⁵⁷ Richard Grunberger, *A Social History of the Third Reich*, p. 278.

⁵⁸ Crawford, *Bund Deutscher Mädel: The Belief and Beauty Society*.

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