Nazi Influence on German Youth Hostels
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THE youth hostel movement, originating in Germany in 1909, has spread since the first World War to every important country in Europe, save Russia, and as far afield as the United States and Canada. Despite this fact, the movement has not been subjected to any systematic sociological investigation. It might well be studied as an instance of collective behavior, with the purpose of arriving at a clearer understanding of the way a movement arises, develops, and becomes institutionalized.

Sociologists, interested in studying social movements, have, on the whole, been most concerned to get at the typical process involved, abstracting it, for the purposes of analysis, from other complicating movements in the community or society.

One aspect of social movements in particular, however, has not been adequately studied: what happens to a movement of one type when another movement, perhaps of greater stature and influence, and arising out of the same basic social and cultural conditions but taking a different direction, impinges upon it? Are the two movements likely to converge and coalesce, and if so how is this likely to affect their future development? In short, when any given movement grows and develops in power, what relation to the dominant groups in that society does it tend to take?

It may be assumed that, as any movement grows, the dominant groups within the society attempt to enter into it and to divert it to their own advantage. Particularly in a society undergoing change, where a new elite and a different ideology are developing, the general or more central movement will impinge on the other segmental movement and modify it, subordinating it to the purposes of the more central movement.

The development of youth hostels in Germany during the period in which German society was being reorganized under Nazi leadership provides an excellent opportunity to check the foregoing hypothesis. The typical hostel system tends to encourage and develop cosmopolitan attitudes among its members. Hostlers generally acquire some degree of international sympathy and understanding, a process strongly facilitated by the primary contacts which the youth hostel fosters. However, a radical shift in a country's political ideology, such as occurred in Germany, must affect the character of international sympathy and understanding among hostlers: as the nation is swept with heightened nationalistic sentiment, it tends to curtail educational programs of the hostels that are designed to foster world friendliness, and to divert the hostel movement to the accomplishment of new objectives.

This paper, therefore, attempts to show, (1) how the youth hostels in Germany have functioned to foster internationalism prior to the advent of the Nazis, and (2) how a change in the political ideology attendant upon the Nazi movement...

1 See article by John and Mavis Biesanz, “Social Distance in the Youth Hostel Movement,” Sociology and Social Research, XXV, January–February, 1941, pp. 237-245.
brought about corresponding changes in the ideology of the hostel system within Germany. In another paper the writer proposes to show how Germany has used the hostels as an effective propaganda device among her minority groups in other countries in her "Drang nach Östen." 13

Typical youth hostels are inexpensive lodgings catering to traveling members of both sexes whose interest is principally one of hiking or cycling. They are located at places affording ready access to points of interest—cities, historical sites, scenic places, outdoor recreational centers.

The types of contacts fostered by the youth hostel are characteristically democratic. All young people are welcome irrespective of race, nationality, class, creed, or political allegiance. In addition to this total absence of discrimination the fact that everyone pays the same price for food and lodging makes conspicuous consumption impossible, while all dress in more or less the same type of simple clothing. Intimate forms of address are used such as du and tu, instead of Sie and vous. Dormitory facilities, cooking apparatus, and all recreational activities are shared. Hostelers wait on themselves; moreover, they participate in cleaning, dish washing, and other work of a general nature.

Hostels are always supervised, usually by married couples who are in the work because of their interest in youth; the renumeration is on the whole too small to make the service commercially profitable. With few exceptions hostel leaders, consisting largely of educators and other idealists interested in youth problems, contribute their time to the organization and administration of the youth hostels without monetary compensation.

II

Richard Schirrmann, school teacher, founder, and promoter of hostels in an unofficial capacity even today, regarded the improvement of health as a primary object of the youth hostel movement. He led his school children from the crowded city into the open country for overnight or longer hikes. He stressed outdoor exercise, abstinence from smoking and drinking, and regular hours of sleep. Moreover, he made hostel life as democratic and inexpensive as possible.

Attracted by this inexpensive mode of traveling, as well as by the absence of ethnocentrism, thousands of young people from many countries spent their vacations hiking and cycling throughout Germany. One of the significant results of the commingling of young people in the democratic milieu of the youth hostel has been the development of international friendship. In short, hostel membership together with mutual interests and activities minimized national prejudices: through intimate participation in the collective representations young people were drawn together into a close and intimate relationship.

Originally hostels were used largely by school children. However, with the growing unrest following the World War, the movement gained further momentum. Specifically, such factors as the growth of cities, depressed economic conditions, and increased regimentation of life augmented general unrest in Germany. Among youth faced with a bleak future, possessing little money, and suffering from poor health unrest was most acutely felt. It was in an

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13 See "The Nazi Youth Hostel Among German Minorities in Other Countries," Social Science, Spring Number.
attempt to cope with these problems that organized recreational activities were fostered. Hosteling with its inexpensive mode of traveling (costing as little as five cents a night for minors and ten cents for adults) came to be recognized as an important means for the improvement of health as well as for the control of unrest. Consequently the young people—particularly students, teachers, white collar workers, and professionals—began to participate in the youth hostel movement.

In actual importance this thirty-year-old movement is essentially a post-war phenomenon. As the factors outlined above came into play the 60,000 overnights registered in 1919 multiplied over eight times to a figure of 506,000 within two years, then mounted steadily to 4,630,683 in 1933.

The German youth hostel naturally spread into other countries as an increasing number of foreigners became acquainted with it. Typically, a group of enthusiastic youth, newly returned from hosteling in Germany helped to organize hostel systems in their respective countries. Thus, in the main, hostels in these countries were patterned in a large measure according to the principles laid down by Schirmann and his followers. On a multitude of questions, by request, Schirmann gave advice; on several occasions he made extensive hostel trips to other countries, giving assistance gratuitously. However, in a few instances the systems have deviated somewhat from the original pattern, due to the dominant institutional arrangement of the society.

World hostel usage was increasing steadily until the outbreak of the present war. Conservatively, one might estimate (1938) 11,000,000 overnights in some 5,000 youth hostels located in about twenty-five countries. Of this total, 8,750,000 overnights were spent in Germany’s 2,000 hostels.3

Hostel leaders formed an international association in 1932, electing Schirmann as president, and locating the secretariat at Amsterdam. Its aims were great, but its powers few and its finances negligible. None the less, the group of cosmopolitan school teachers and other unpaid visionaries, who led the movement in their own countries and enthusiastically attended the international meetings, has been convinced that the youth hostel movement embraces, on an experimental and model scale at least, vast opportunities for the creation of an ideal world. The writings of these leaders, their concrete activities, and their statements in interviews with the writer—all point to their hope of the establishment of some degree of international understanding among youth.

III

Then, in 1933, the Nazis came to power. There is evidence that even before their ascendency the new elite had visualized the hostel’s utility for fascistic indoctrination, both of Germany’s youth and of foreign hostelers visiting the country. Steadily and progressively the movement was drained of cosmopolitanism, suffused with National Socialism.

3 An estimate from figures available on separate countries, given the writer by the international secretary at Amsterdam. The German figure comes from the national office, Berlin. Hostel overnights for 1939, cut down considerably by the European war, are estimated at 10,000,000 by the American hostel headquarters.

Due to varying definitions and the slowness of reports from the countries concerned there is no agreement on the number of overnights, the number of hostels, or even the number of countries which possess hostels. In the years 1934, 1935, 1938, and 1939 the writer has visited youth hostels in twenty countries.
In April Baldur von Schirach, newly appointed Reich leader of the youth, stressed the importance of incorporating the hostel organization within the framework of the Nazi program. Herr Lloyd, German head of their international youth hostel service, briefly summarized for the writer the fascist aims in regard to youth hostels.

Before National Socialism came to power hostels were only overnight places; today they are cultural centers... The present movement is part and parcel of the rest of the German regime... we have only one party, and it is of course natural that its interests, which are the interests of the German folk, should be furthered.

As part of the wider regime, the hostels have their part to contribute. This, in particular, involves allowing the young people to wander throughout their homeland, acquiring a wider love for it, a deeper desire to further its interests, a friendship with those met on the ways and those with whom they travel which binds all Germany together.4

The official hostel magazine, Jugend und Heimat (Youth and Native Land), is even more outspoken in showing the relationship between the youth hostels and Nazi aims.

The youth hostel itself... must be the home of the Hitler youth. Every day, every evening, boys and girls must assemble for earnest work and cheerful play under its roof. Here must also the poorest, the one alone, feel at home. The picture of our leader should look down on the children, as they take pains time and again, through lectures and discussions, to enter into the ideals of our movement....

There is a tremendous importance in having the proper leaders. Wander leaders must be reliable in their loyalty to Adolf Hitler. They must lead their young people into the ways and wishes of the national revolution... Our youth must be ready to serve the Fatherland, which they have seen and wandered through, every hour and every day of their lives... and to follow our leader, Adolf Hitler, on every path he indicates. They must be ready to intercede for the honor and freedom of our God-given Fatherland.8

He who builds youth hostels sees to it that the political education of the German youth towards an indissoluble unity of the German community is furthered, and thereby contributes to the immortalization of the Third Reich.6

Hitler youth go on outings in order to see their home. Impressively, a trip takes place to the eastern boundary of our Fatherland. Right on that very spot it becomes clear to the young German that he must stake his best against robber enemies in order to preserve blood and soil. He who returns from this border will take back a piece of Germany with him.7

This redefinition of the hostel movement involved a transference and reinterpretation of hostel symbols to fit the Nazi objectives. The result was a hybrid ideology. Partisanship is rationalized; “Germany has only one party.” Nationalism is given a militant character. The Wandervögel and the carefree hostelers of pre-Hitler days are branded as “eccentric,” “undisciplined,” and “irresponsible,” and are associated with the discredited ideas of Marxism and liberalism.

The change in political ideology brought about several important alterations in hostel organization. First, Schirrmann was asked to retire from active leadership, and a young Nazi who had never before used hostels was given the presidency. At the same time all hostel parents not in full accord with the new program of the new regime were eliminated.

Secondly, the international title of the official hostel magazine, Die Jugendherberge (The Youth Hostel), was changed to the more localized caption of Jugend und Heimat (Youth and Native Land). At once the magazine discarded its broader point of view and became a political

4 Personal Interview in Berlin (May, 1939).
5 Jugend und Heimat (October, 1933), p. 174.
7 Ibid. (October, 1936), p. 173.
organ for the dissemination of Nazi ideologies. At present it glorifies the local landscape, architecture, and other phases of German cultural achievements designed to impress young people with the idea of national superiority, and exhorts them to do their part in the "defensive war."

Thirdly, the free and democratic hostel atmosphere, characteristic of the former era, has now given way to regimentation: Hitler's picture is displayed in the general room of every hostel; "Heil Hitler" is the officially required password on arrival and departure; house parents are quite often party officials, dressed in uniform; hostel radios are tuned in on National Socialist programs; the hostels themselves are not infrequently used for political activities. There is less individual and small group wandering; the visitor constantly meets large groups on the German roads who, dressed in the clothes of the Hitler Jugend, bearing flags and singing political songs, march in lock step from hostel to hostel. Such changes as these have tended to make the contacts of foreigners with the German youth increasingly categorical.8

During the present war, "strengthening the inner front" has been emphasized as the task of the youth too young to fight. The 1940 issues of Jugend und Heimat describe the utilization of hostels as hospitals, refuges, and barracks, and the military training of the Hitler Youth. Interest is manifested in the founding of hostels in Italy.

Finally, various activities of the youth hostel were much restricted. Political discussion, in particular, became one-sided and stereotyped: foreigners rarely took part in a serious and frank exchange of political ideas with the German young people.

How was it possible for the hostel movement, the ideals of which appear to be antithetical to those of National Socialism, to yield so readily to this program? One clue may be found in their parallel rise; both movements are essentially outgrowths of post-war unrest. The two sentiments of the German people which found in the Hitler movement an anchorage and a promise of fulfillment have been described as "a strong patriotic feeling which demanded the unity of the German people and a desire for social justice, which opposed the class struggle and class divisions."9

These were also objectives of hosteling, for after the upheaval of the World War Schirrmann pleaded that the friendliness of hosteling could help to erase class distinctions and restore national unity. Professor P. J. Müller, former International President of hostels, commented in an interview at Luxemburg in July, 1939:

"Schirrmann was in some ways the forerunner of National Socialism in his study of folk lore, customs, and dances, and his love of the national culture; but in significant points hosteling is not the same."

What nationalism there was in the movement, however, co-existed with the emphasis on peace and internationalism. Hosteling was not a direct attack on the social order, being rather utopian and visionary. Nazism was revolutionary. One was conciliatory; the other, militant. While international understanding was

8 Foreign overnights in German youth hostels for the years 1935, 1936, 1937, and 1938 were 106,360, 196,591, 215,847, and 299,706, respectively. These figures were compiled for the writer at national headquarters, Berlin.

This increase is due in part to the growth of knowledge abroad of Germany's inexpensive hostel system, in part to the bargain rate travel marks which the Nazi government offered visitors.

9 Theodore Abel, Why Hitler Came Into Power, p. 143.
perhaps the chief aim in the minds of hostel leaders, Hitler in Mein Kampf expressed hatred of the "international poisoners" of Germany.

However, it must not be assumed that all the original purposes and programs of the youth hostel were lost upon the advent of the Nazis, for such is not the case. In the first place, despite great political changes the German youth hostel still performs a number of its former functions, among which are the development of health, a decrease of class consciousness—for a strong drive is made in this direction by the government—and some decrease of social distance both among the Germans themselves and among Germans and foreigners. Secondly, the influx of foreigners has some value in that conversations with them represent one of the few, perhaps the only, untampered-with outside influence which enters the average young German's existence. Thirdly, the Germans are obviously anxious to win foreign adherents to their political views by means of the youth hostel—and this attempt assures some contact with divergent views. Obviously, foreign hostlers at present come only from Axis countries.

IV

The youth hostel movement had its chief original impetus in Germany immediately after the World War. To cope more rationally with the general unrest among the youth this movement emphasized inexpensive health activities—walking and bicycling. The movement also emphasized the importance of world peace, and thus the informal discussion of international problems occupied a chief place among its activities.

With the rise of the Nazi regime the movement gained additional impetus: the number of larger hostels increased, overnights almost doubled within a five-year period, the amount of organized activity in connection with the hostels multiplied.

At the same time every politically vital aspect of the hostel was set in accord with Nazi lines: hostel organizers, house parents, hostelers, hostel literature. Thus a relatively independent movement, the German youth hostel, was not only dominated, but even rather thoroughly incorporated into another and a constantly aggrandizing movement, the spread of National Socialism. As these changes were introduced, internationalism subsided.

As this study illustrates, the course of a social movement is determined by its relation to contemporaneous movements affecting the existing major institutions in that society. It follows a continuously accommodative course.

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