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The German Youth Ring: Programmatic Leaflet (November 19, 1946)

Founded in November 1946, the German Youth Ring [*Deutsche Jugendring*] aimed to counter the political disorientation of German youth in the postwar period. With its educational work and leisure-time activities, it picked up on positive elements of the classic German youth movements of the prewar period. Membership was open to all youth organizations of any kind, including political and confessional groups. The idea of a united or state youth group in the sense of the National Socialist Hitler Youth [*Hitler-Jugend* or JH] or the League of German Girls [*Bund deutscher Mädel* or BDM] was rejected.

“The German youth invited to Hohe Meißner on the occasion of the ‘Day of the Young Generation’ on October 13, 1914, issue a unanimous appeal to join together in Youth Rings in the spirit of democracy everywhere in Germany, in city and countryside and in all zones, to work together with the goal of establishing the German Youth Ring. German youth, out of a sense of the highest human and political responsibility toward the youth of all nations, affirms its commitment to democracy, social justice, and the community of nations. With inner truthfulness, it seeks to serve international peace in this way.”

The creation of a German Youth Ring was resolved with this appeal. The preliminary work was assigned to our central office. The results of our experiences and preliminary work are summarized as follows:

The German Youth Ring seeks to gather all vital forces among German youth. In other words, no new united or state youth [group]! The concern that something like that could happen again is justified, but unfounded. For example, the Youth Ring in Electoral Hesse explicitly stated in its bylaws that the autonomy of the associated leagues and associations would be completely preserved after the merger. In fact, the German Youth Ring does not wish to be a new organization alongside the existing leagues and associations. Rather, one could call it the youth parliament, the democratically formed representative of the entire German youth. We infer from the letters sent to us from all states and zones of Germany that the realization of the necessity of such a merger is growing. The fragmentation that already undid the German youth movement once must not repeat itself.

Who belongs?

All youth leagues and associations, whether large or small, in city or country, of whatever background and orientation. In Electoral Hesse, the Youth Ring includes, alongside smaller,

locally defined groups, the Protestant and Catholic youth, the sports youth, the Boy Scouts, the youth league "Friendship," and the Free German Youth. One question still in need of clarification concerns the party youth. In the American zone, for example, young people under the age of 18 are prohibited from being active in party politics. However, in those places where youth groups are permitted in political parties, we believe that this presents no obstacle to their membership in the Youth Ring.

To the members of the old youth movements, we make this recommendation: make yourselves available to the newly formed youth leagues and associations. However, we do ask that you dispense with the creation of purely traditional groups. The claim to leadership in this area is something the youth already rejected unequivocally at Hohe Meißner.

The new way of life of the new German youth

It is not here yet, but it must be created, or rather organically developed, if we want to internally overcome the unfortunate Hitler Youth spirit and the moral dissipation of the postwar period. The Youth Ring can provide crucial help in this enormous pedagogical task, which all leagues and associations, without exception, confront today: by holding workshops for youth leaders and youth workers, by setting up a clearing house that procures and provides materials and teachers for singing, folk dancing, and amateur plays. That is also why singing groups, musicians' guilds, folk dancing clubs, and amateur theater groups belong in the Youth Ring. We want to faithfully preserve and cultivate the legacy of the old youth movement. But we also know that today we must often go our own way and find new forms.

The political responsibility of German youth

This is something the old youth movement largely lacked, to its own detriment and that of the entire nation. Today there are new threats: the threat of the politicization of youth by the parties, and the threat of apathy on the part of the youth itself.

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Source: Walter Rosenwald and Bernd Theis, *Enttäuschung und Zuversicht. Zur Geschichte der Jugendarbeit in Hessen 1945-1950* [*Disappointment and Confidence. On the History of Youth Work in Hesse, 1945-1950*]. Munich: DJI, 1984, p. 213.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap