Re-educating German Youth

by Dr. Norman E. Himes

The Youth Activities Program of Military Government and the Army can be understood only in terms of our military mission in Germany. The chief objective of this mission is not only the negative one of the destruction of Nazi ideals and war-making power, but also the positive achievement of democratic reorientation in order that Germany may eventually find its place as a respected member of the family of nations.

The voluntary cooperation of American women, civilians, and WAC’s in the youth program can assist materially in attacking the conception, strengthened by the Nazis, that Americans are a self-centered, materialistic people who work only for their own interests and are unprepared to make sacrifices for the welfare of the community in general. Merely by setting a good example we can in some measure diffuse the spirit of democracy. By showing the constructive aspects of our personalities as Americans, varied as those personalities are, we can also help to undermine the Nazi pressure toward conformity, which in no small measure still lives.

The Youth Activities Program is important because we can get the most effective results by working with youth, because there is a strong tradition in Germany of youth activities upon which to build, and finally because the economic and social disorganization now current contribute toward the feeling of hopelessness, bewilderment, and lack of confidence so widespread among German youth.

The program of this conference, which has been set up primarily to assist in the training of American volunteers, emphasizes practical next-steps in the program and the techniques of good group work. My assignment is a more general one: to place youth activities in their broader setting, as one step in the re-orientation of the German people.

It is essential to recognize at the outset that the youth program is merely a small part of the far-reaching task of reorientation in Germany. Our youth program can merely assist other institutions: a reformed school system; more enlightened family and religious indoctrination. The German youth organizations serve only some youth — say 30 percent ages 10 to 18 — for a few hours a week.

By way of passing let me mention a few general objectives for the formal educational system toward which we ought to work in the immediate future: the abolition of the two-track educational system by which youth were predestined from an early age to prepare, on the one hand, for the most humble occupations or, on the other hand, for the professions — an undemocratic system which prejudged human abilities and capacities, and wasted talent. Germany needs more equal educational opportunities for all; more democratic standards in intuition and in the provision of textbooks, in support by public funds; revised curricula, promoting international good will and understanding; more adequate teacher training; better health supervision in education; compulsory school attendance to a later age. These are merely a few of the objectives toward which we should work.

Just as the school system deals with formal education, so the youth program attempts to achieve democratic education through informal procedures.

Before Hitler, German youth groups emphasized free association. While religious and sport groups dominated, as they do now, there was little pressure toward conformity.

Under Hitler, youth were regimented, were obliged to take up paramilitary and military activities; organizations were “coordinated,” consolidated, and strengthened to induce “unity” and strengthen the state.

We will misunderstand, however, the significance of German youth organization under the Nazis if we fail to appreciate the strong sense of community responsibility and loyalty to the state which was inculcated. Hitler youth organizations were not without idealism, Nazism merely misdirected this idealism into anti-social channels. The grave danger now is that we shall assist materially and strengthen German organizations, but will not succeed in inculcating a different set of ideals, in this case, morally tenable ideals. These are necessarily difficult to inculcate and the process takes time.

It is difficult to teach the spirit of a culture, in this case, democratic ideals. But a first essential is a clear understanding of them on our own part. Democracy is associated not merely with the Rights of Man and the Four Freedoms, but with faith in the inherent decency and potentialities of the common man. It teaches the integrity of human personality, emphasizes freedom of individual conduct provided that it is not demonstrably anti-social. Democratic relations between human beings make for the enrichment and maturation of human personality. Many of our problems, including aggression in the world, would be materially reduced if somehow we could train people to be emotionally mature or to achieve adulthood. This may even be more important than purely intellectual training.

At the recent German Youth Assistance Conference held in Berlin, Dr. Himes of the Education and Religious Affairs Branch, OMGUS, discussed—some of the problems involved in the re-orientation of German young people. For the readers of the Weekly Information Bulletin, Dr. Himes has selected excerpts from his address for this article.

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Democracy wishes to see each person developed to the maximum extent of which he is capable by virtue of his genetic endowment. It believes in the merit system; that people should have an opportunity to secure as much training as possible so that their service to the community may be maximized. Democracy merely creates opportunities. It is not a system for preventing people from making mistakes except insofar as it has a kind of automatic machinery for making adjustments. Democracy is more than the mechanics of anything. In politics it is more than the electoral system; it is a system of checks and balances and above all a means of making those who govern sensitive to the will of the electorate. In economic relations it does or should mean the same thing.

Democracy is a growth, not a finished achievement. That is one reason why so many people grow impatient with it. The human race is always looking for shortcuts and Hitlerism was merely the most tragic form it has taken in recent centuries.

Democracy in America is certainly not perfected; but we probably have it to a greater degree than any other country in the world. We have what it takes to build it on a stable foundation, namely the machinery for making corrections as we go along.

Democracy is associated not simply with tolerance but with an active appreciation of differences in points of view. Hence it respects minorities. The spirit of democracy is essentially the spirit of humility and of science.

In democracies, as compared with dictatorships, we do not believe in "pushing people around." We believe in a minimum of interference. The Nazis used all the resources of modern science to make people conform. Their strutting arrogance was the very reverse of democratic humility. This is one of many reasons why Nazism and democratic institutions are so far apart.

Since Nazism built on a tradition of two hundred years of military aggression, and since militarism itself is a compound of many other psychological attitudes deeply entrenched in

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