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Interviews with former members of the SS, other Nazi officials, and witnesses to Nazi Germany
RG-50.593

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Interview with Artur Axmann, Nazi leader of the Hitler Youth (Reichsjugendführer), 1940 –
1945

Recorded on August 23, 1990

The interview focuses on the differences between German National Socialism and the Marxist Socialism of the former Soviet Union, and the goals of the *Hitler Jugend* (Hitler Youth) Movement.

Interviewer: In our first conversation you said that you considered yourself a Socialist. However, in light of developments in the Soviet Union, Socialism is now considered a bogeyman. Was the Socialism that you embraced also a failure?

Axmann: The answer is a definite no, even though after half a century, I think differently about this matter. Looking back, the Third Reich was like Janus and had two faces. The misdeeds of that regime overshadow the achievements of the German people in six years of peace and in six years of war. The German Reich did not collapse from within, because of its socialist ideology, but because the German Reich was defeated by the Allies.

Interviewer: How did you view the difference between international and national socialism?

Axmann: International socialism was about global class warfare and expropriation of the expropriators. Our movement was about overcoming class warfare and uniting people of all classes as comrades.

Interviewer: Other than class warfare, what other differences were there from Marxism?

Axmann: Marxism was materialistic and considered labor as a good that the worker sold to his employer. The Nazi ideology awakened a new ethos of work – labor was no longer an input, work itself took on meaning.

Interviewer: What was the role of private property in this new social order?

Axmann: National Socialism recognized the human striving to own property. Little people strived for ownership. Marxists thought that thru education, they could get people to renounce private property.

Interviewer: During the Third Reich, there were restrictions on private initiative and ownership. What were the reasons?

Axmann: State ownership required businesses to look at more than just profits, but also strategic considerations that would serve the common good.

Interviewer: Hitler once said that German socialism was not for export. How do you interpret that?

Axmann: National socialism was influenced by the national character and by the environment, based on the German worth ethic while international socialism increasingly took on differential characteristics based on the nation.

Interviewer: Let's focus now on the *Hitler Jugend* movement which you founded. What was its most important objective?

Axmann: I had full responsibility for implementing the program and social goals were only a part of it – there were also cultural aspects and physical fitness. However, the most pressing priority was the health of the youth which had suffered in the aftermath of WWI. We wanted to give physical exams to all the youth, we wanted to vanquish tuberculosis, and our expectations were met – many leading doctors volunteered to help. Health education, particularly with respect to alcohol and tobacco was also very important.

Interviewer: Many of these people were not members of the NSDAP. Was it important to the leadership that they join?

Axmann: That was a matter of personal choice. For us their participation was sufficient. We were very open to co-workers of all sorts, if they worked loyally, whether they joined or not.

Interviewer: The *Hitler Jugend* movement became heavily involved in employment issues, a change from earlier youth movements. What was your vision?

Axmann: We believe that your work fulfills you. There are two big choices in life – the choice of a partner and the choice of a career. A happy marriage and job satisfaction are fundamental to social harmony. Surveys showed that 33% of people were unhappy with their careers. This imposes a great price. We wanted youth to be groomed for their roles in society so we instituted national professional competitions for workers, apprentices and students. By 1938, we covered 300 professions, had 2.8 million competitors including 800,000 women and 100,000 winners. There was even a special track for the handicapped.

Interviewer: Critics have charged that the competitions also included sports and questions about ideology. Was this an indoctrination in National Socialism?

Axmann: The ideological portion was worth only 20%, we felt it was important to put some priority on physical fitness. We gave everyone a chance to demonstrate what s/he was capable of and we put the spotlight on the industrious, even if they came from a remote little village. This

provided a basis for equal opportunity for all based on skills. Prizes were not monetary but cultural opportunities, the shortening of apprenticeships, job opportunities, and *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength through Joy) trips to Norway.

Interviewer: You haven't talked about the sociopolitical requirements of the *Hitler Jugend*.

Axmann: We did not start our work with any requirements or stipulations. We had six million unemployed so that was not the first priority. There were no raises so that we could increase employment. We instituted laws about free time and vacation, outlawed child labor. We made meaningful progress but the war intervened and war is the arch enemy of social thinking. We felt that if the very last worker is satisfied, then we have succeeded.