

Chapter 2

The Myth of Youth:

Langemarck, Weimar, and the Wandervögel

The history of Langemarck is a history of words, not deeds, and thoughts, not actions. An insignificant skirmish in a failed war became important for interwar Germany because of the emotions that were to be associated with it and the resonance it was to have in a turbulent and troubled time. At the center of the history lies a question mark, for it is impossible to know exactly what happened at the Battle of Langemarck in November 1914. The actual events that were to become uniquely significant for interwar Germany were known by few at the time and by none today. Perhaps for that very reason, Langemarck became the focus of a powerful war myth, a myth that was to inspire and animate many Germans in the interwar period. The account that circulated at the time was that a youthful regiment, while singing the *Deutschlandlied*, a patriotic anthem, had charged into battle and taken the French front lines. I call this popular account a myth, not because it was necessarily untrue (although it probably was), but because it crystallized a number of German beliefs about the War and about themselves, taking on a mythological significance regardless of its truth or falsity. There were many other battles during the War, and many other falsified battle reports, but no other battle matched the importance of Langemarck in the public mind; the remembrance of no other battle would have such serious consequences.¹

The content of the myth of Langemarck cannot be easily separated from its popularity; it was popular precisely because the values it embodied evoked strong feelings in the German people. The resonance of the myth lay in its depiction of German youth sacrificing themselves for the nation. The report did not specify the number of dead, but this silence was itself significant, since everyone knew

¹ The closest British equivalent might be the story of Captain W. P. Nevill, who started an attack at the Somme by charging across no-man's-land kicking a football. He was killed instantly. See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 27.

that such a military action would be accompanied by considerable loss of life.² The myth of Langemarck was essentially a Romantic myth, its values dating back to nineteenth-century trends in German culture that became very powerful amidst the confusion of the Weimar era. It postulated a German past of pseudo-medieval chivalric values, an honorable history that had been forgotten in the quest for modern efficiency represented by parliamentary democracy. The theme of youth formed the center of the myth because of the position of youth within Germany as a symbol of rejuvenation and energy. The prewar years in Wilhelmine Germany were marked by the various youth movements, movements that exalted the vigor of youth over the conventions and dullness of established society; this cult of youth continued in the Weimar era. The myth of Langemarck combined the valorization of youth with an implicit call to patriotism, to worship of the nation as an ideal. Despite, or perhaps because of, its short history as a unified state, Germany was filled with people who abstracted and idealized “the nation.” Langemarck became a concrete example of the nobility of Germans acting for the fatherland. Finally, the myth of Langemarck added to the values of youth and patriotism the idea of sacrifice; incarnated in the mass of people who rushed to join the colors at the outbreak of war in 1914, sacrifice was held to be honorable and noble, the “redemptive death of the warrior.”³ The values of the myth were generally apolitical, but they could be used for more aggressive purposes: the cult of sacrifice, nation, and youth eventually proved amenable to the antidemocratic ideology of the Right as the myth of Langemarck became connected to a rejection of Weimar society.

The Battle of Langemarck

The momentum of the German army’s initial attack was stopped in September 1914 on the Marne. As a quick and decisive victory was critical for the success of the Schlieffen plan, the Germans looked to circle around the Allied front by outflanking them in the north. The Allies had

² Bernd Hüppauf, “The Birth of Fascist Man from the Spirit of the Front,” in John Milfull, ed., *The Attractions of Fascism: Social Psychology and Aesthetics of the ‘Triumph of the Right’* (New York: Berg, 1990), 49.

much the same idea; the so-called “race to the sea” then began. The Germans recruited a new army for the effort, the Fourth Army. It consisted of six army corps, four of which were dispatched to Flanders. The new army included a number of volunteers, eager and enthusiastic but poorly prepared; the Fourth Army was sent into action after less than seven weeks of training. Even with the new army, Germany could not win the “race to the sea” and by October the War had become a stalemate. The front ceased to move; it stretched from the Alps to the sea as each side entrenched themselves and the devastating war of attrition began. It was to last until the German army began to collapse four years later.

At this point in late 1914, Germany concentrated its effort on the Ypres area, attempting to force its way through the newly established Allied line at one of its most vulnerable points. Exposed on three sides to enemy fire, the Ypres Salient was attacked from October 18 to November 22, but with little success. Britain managed to hold this exposed town for the duration of the War. On November 11, the German high command (OHL) released a communiqué about the ongoing battles around Ypres. Virtually all German newspapers, regardless of their political allegiances, reported this announcement on their front pages in the days after the battle.⁴ The basis of a long-lasting and influential myth was formed by these deceptively simple words repeated across the nation:

We made good progress yesterday in the Yser sector. West of Langemarck, young regiments broke forward with the song “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles” against the first line of enemy positions and took them. Approximately 2000 men of the French infantry line were captured and six machine guns were captured.⁵

The Battle of Langemarck was not a great victory for Germany. Even if the account of the OHL were correct, the capture of six machine guns and two thousand Frenchmen does not explain the lasting position that Langemarck was to occupy in the public mind. The Battle did not succeed in

³ Jay W. Baird, *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 1.

⁴ Hüppauf, 47-8; Uwe-K. Ketelsen, “»Die Jugend von Langemarck« Ein poetisch-politisches Motiv der Zwischenkriegszeit” in Thomas Koebner, Rolf-Peter Janz, and Frank Trommler, eds., *»Mit unz zieht die neue Zeit« Der Mythos Jugend* (Frankfurt am Main: Surkamp Verlag, 1985), 70.

⁵ Quoted in Ketelsen, 70 (Am Yser-Abschnitt machten wir gestern gute Fortschritte.... Westlich Langemarck brachen junge Regimente unter dem Gesange »Deutschland, Deutschland über alles« gegen der erste Linie der

breaking the Allied line; in fact, it was part of a large setback for the Germans. It may have seemed important in November 1914, when two thousand prisoners was a considerable number and hope for a breakthrough lingered, but by the end of the War it was obvious that the hope for victory aroused by Langemarck was a false one. For this reason, the continued importance of the myth of Langemarck must be sought, not in the actual events, but in the emotions the myth evoked.

Furthermore, the events recounted in the OHL account probably never occurred. Most historians agree that there was probably never such a regiment of singing youth; if they did sing, it was most likely not out of patriotic motives but rather to keep track of each other. Likewise, the regiment was not predominantly or even particularly young: in most battalions of the Fourth Army, the proportion of young volunteers of high school and university age was less than ten percent; at most it was not more than twenty percent. Combined, teachers and students made up only eighteen percent of those who fought at Langemarck.⁶ Further, the evidence indicates that the Battle of Langemarck did not take place west of Langemarck, but rather near the town of Bixchote (at best, north-west of Langemarck); the best reason anyone has offered for the change of location is that “Langemarck” sounds much more Germanic than the strangely spelled Bixchote.⁷ Throughout the War, the official reports of the OHL were constructed with greater concern for the morale of the German people than for factual accuracy. There was a belief that the numerical supremacy of the Allies could be countered by a high fighting spirit; this fighting spirit would be deflated by poor reports (however factual) from the front.⁸ It seems likely that this account of Langemarck, coming as it did in the middle of a futile German assault, was propagated for reasons of morale. Unlike other such reports, though, this report continued to be important after the War ended. “It lost its historical reference,” taking on a life of its own that allowed it to remain influential throughout the interwar

feindlichen Stellung vor und nahmen sie. Etwa 2000 Mann französischer Linien-Infanterie wurden gefangen und sechs Maschinengewehre erbeutet.)

⁶ Hüppauf, 47; George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 71.

⁷ Hüppauf, 48.

⁸ *Ibid.*

period.⁹ When Rudolf G. Binding came to write his account of the Battle of Langemarck in 1925, he placed the events of the singing youth in late October; this error was unimportant, though, for the power of the myth of Langemarck never lay in its historical accuracy.¹⁰

The German Youth Movement: Renewal and Destruction

The primary reason for the success of the Langemarck myth was its mobilization of the emotions surrounding the issue of youth in Germany. The problem of youth had emerged as a crucial one in the closing years of the Wilhelmine empire and was reasserted during the War and after. The changing place and increasing importance of youth can be seen by following the history of the youth movement in Germany. When Germans thought of the youth of Langemarck, the youth they thought of and the way they thought of them was conditioned by their experience of the youth movement.

The independent youth movement appeared around the turn of the century. It can be seen, in large part, as a function of the status of German society in the late 1800s. A belated and quick industrialization and modernization had left its marks on society.¹¹ The bourgeoisie, especially, felt endangered by a rapid modernization that often left them merely bystanders, their position “undermined by the new forces and values of urban-industrial society.”¹² The problems of industrialization were even greater for the young; many felt ignored or threatened with marginalization by modernization.¹³ As a result, the middle class, and especially the youth of the middle class, began to protest the problems of modern industrial society. Summarizing these developments, Peter Stachura has argued that the youth movement “reflected an acute boredom with contemporary society, and this was basically caused by the failure of the technological age and urban

⁹ Ketelsen, 72 (Er verliert seine historische Referenz).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ The idea of a “normal” path to industrialization from which Germany diverged has come under criticism recently (especially with reference to the controversial *Sonderweg* thesis), but it is nonetheless clear that certain features of the German process had deleterious social consequences.

¹² Peter Stachura, *The German Youth Movement 1900-1945* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 14.

¹³ Detlev J. K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (London: Penguin, 1991), 95.

culture to offer youth either emotional satisfaction or moral inspiration.”¹⁴ With its roots in an emotional discontent with the present, it was comparable to the futurist and expressionist movements in Germany and elsewhere on the Continent.¹⁵ Italian futurism had arisen in similar circumstances, engendered by profound dissatisfaction with a social system thought lifeless; likewise, it came after a belated, rapid, and incomplete modernization. For all the similarities, though, the German youth movement was uniquely German in its values. Where Marinetti and the futurists embraced machines and technology as a way out of the stagnation of society, the German youth movement emphasized the very things dismissed by industrial society. It extolled the glories of hiking in the countryside, returning to Nature and the primacy of humans and human interaction. It combined a Romantic view of nature with an elevation of a perceived essential German character found in the Volk. “Because the landscape which inspires [the Wandervögel],” wrote one enthusiast, “is the landscape of the German *Heimat* [home], such love awakens love for *Volk* and fatherland ... a national-Germanic background for all their culture and style of life.”¹⁶

The “Wandervögel,” a so-called “Committee for Schoolboy Excursions,” was officially established in 1901 in Steglitz, a middle-sized town near Berlin. It was the outgrowth of activity at the Steglitz Grammar School, which for several years had sponsored weekend and holiday trips to the countryside. The school children had, for example, traveled to the Harz Mountains in 1897, to Cologne and the Rhine in 1898, and to the Bohemian Forest in 1899.¹⁷ Concentrating on similar outdoor excursions, the Wandervögel quickly spread to other towns and schools in central and northern Germany; it had much less success in southern Germany where it was resisted by the Church. It remained a middle-class, urban, and Protestant movement. It had few members from the aristocracy or the lower classes; tellingly, Wandervögel groups were likely to be attacked if they traveled through working-class areas. By 1914, there were over 25,000 members of the Wandervögel

¹⁴ Stachura, 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*; Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 46; Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 57.

¹⁶ Quoted in George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), 173.

in 800 local branches.¹⁸ By this time the character of the movement had also changed somewhat: it had become more directly involved in reforming the perceived faults of German society instead of merely withdrawing into nature, although nature was not forgotten. Not surprisingly, the centerpiece of these efforts was educational reform, a reaction against the dull technical education many students despised.

What is generally called the Wandervögel was in fact a group of various organizations modeled on the original Wandervögel. In 1913, an effort was made to bring these groups together. Over 3000 people assembled on a mountain, the Hohe Meissner, forming the “First Free German Youth Conference.” The proclamation announcing the meeting on this site sacred to the youth movement summarized their position:

German youth stands before a historic turning-point in its development. Youth, until now only an appendage of the older generation, excluded from the public affairs of the nation and forced into a passive role of learning—into a frivolous, negative role in society—is beginning to assert itself. It is attempting, independently of the dull customs of adults and of the constraints of hateful convention, to shape its own life.... And youth believes that our nation needs nothing more today than such a spiritual rejuvenation.¹⁹

At Hohe Meissner, these various groups joined together in a loose federation, known as the *Freideutsche Jugend*, the Free German Youth, and issued a rather strange proclamation which reflected a combination of idealism and a commitment to concrete reforms:

Free German Youth, on their own initiative, under their own responsibility, and with deep sincerity, are determined to independently shape their own lives. For the sake of this inner freedom, they will take united action under any and all circumstances. All meetings of Free German Youth are free of alcohol and smoking.²⁰

Above all, this declaration reflected a rejection of the constraints society had placed on youth. For a while, this rejection of society entailed a distance from political events. The expressionist editor Franz Pfemfert, speaking about the meeting at Hohe Meissner, urged such detachment: “Be neither ‘radical’ in the sense of day-to-day politics nor ‘nationalist.’ Be young! Struggle for the right to be

¹⁷ Stachura, 19-20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹⁹ Quoted in Stachura, 169.

²⁰ Quoted in Stachura, 33.

young against a narrow-minded and ossified world!”²¹ Shortly before the War, the Wandervögel rejected the overtures of the members of the influential nationalist organization, the Pan-German League.²²

As Robert Wohl notes, “by 1914, youth had become a symbol,” a symbol of national revival.²³ The War altered the fortunes of the Wandervögel as it did of the nation, but the symbolic importance of youth was only intensified. Between 7,000 and 10,000 members of the independent youth movement were killed in the War, roughly two-thirds of those who went to fight. During the War, the movement as a whole was drawn further into politics. The Wandervögel began to splinter as leftist and rightist factions emerged within the movement.

The revolutionary period after the War initially reunited many of the youth groups. With the task of national revival, youth was given a purpose in the minds even of those no longer young. Already in 1916 Fritz von Unruh was writing in his novel *Opfergang* [Way of Sacrifice]:

We are the decisive factor. Ours is the initiative! No one will ever again take our heart captive!
In us lives youth! Behind us lie the old men! I see the flame of our purification rise high above
all everyday things, and no common fingers will ever touch it!²⁴

Reinhold Wulle continued this thought, proclaiming in 1919 that “who has youth, has the future.”²⁵ The idealism and youthful hope of the revolutionary period, though, was quickly shattered. The November Revolution served to bring back the divisions within the youth movement that had first appeared during the War. On the left, some welcomed the Revolution, because, as Ernst Kantorowicz wrote, “the very idea of youth demands that Free German Youth support the revolution, because Free German Youth is revolutionary.”²⁶ The rightist elements in the Free German Youth could not accept the socialist leanings of the majority and broke off from them completely. Divided and disillusioned by the failures of the revolutionary years, the Free German Youth was replaced by a wide variety of smaller organizations, often with specific political orientations; the youth movement after 1923 is

²¹ Quoted in Wohl, 45.

²² Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, 179.

²³ Wohl, 45.

²⁴ Quoted in Wohl, 53.

²⁵ Stachura, 38.

generally referred to as Bündische Youth, a name derived from the diverse and unaffiliated “groups” that comprised it. Stachura comments that “every conceivable type of youth group was to be found in Bündische Youth: political, confessional, paramilitary, nationalist, racist, liberal, democratic, socialist, sports, and even Boy Scout.”²⁷ A few broad characterizations can be made about Bündische Youth, characterizations that naturally cannot cover all of the groups but that nonetheless indicate the changing priorities of Weimar youth. On the whole, Bündische Youth was more activist and serious than its nature-oriented predecessors were. The individual groups, often led by charismatic leaders, involved themselves in activities designed to influence the formation of a “new man.” Although ideas differed as to what would make up this “new man,” fellowship within the group and service to the nation were widely important. Bündische Youth was actively involved in reforming and reshaping the educational system and sponsored settlements and work. Although still retaining many of the founding precepts of the Wandervögel, Bündische Youth was a product of the upheaval and fragmentation of the Weimar era. In this turmoil, as consolidation became more difficult, more people wanted it; as rejuvenation became more dangerous, more people hoped for it; and as leadership became more extreme, more people looked to it.

Romanticism and Fascism: the Double Meaning of Langemarck

The popularity and power of the myth of Langemarck depended on the central and controversial position that youth occupied in Germany, a position determined at least in part by the course of the prewar youth movement. The range of possible interpretations of the myth was limited by the connotations the idea of youth carried for the German people. I have sought to separate the discussion of the initial content of the myth, especially regarding youth, from the discussion of the subsequent use of the myth; while such a separation is undoubtedly artificial, it does reflect one

²⁶ Quoted in Stachura., 39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 45-6.

important truth. The myth was not propagated by political forces; it was not fabricated by politicians or artists; rather, it sprang fully-formed from the single report of November 1914. Uwe-K. Ketelsen says that, from the beginning, the myth of Langemarck “marched within an already preexisting field of meanings.”²⁸ It resonated not because it was being used by the politicians for specific goals but because it referred to already existing images and emotions. In this way, it was an unchanging whole. Ketelsen notes this immobility, claiming that “the *motif* developed no productive dynamic; it was only repetitive. It set free no productive fantasies; again and again and again there were its three elements: youth, nation, sacrifice (and their immanent negations: establishment, society, materialism) which it repeated ... in predetermined paths.”²⁹

It cannot be denied, though, that the myth of Langemarck was appropriated to serve various political ends. In fact, during the 1920s and 1930s, it became ubiquitous, annexed most specifically to the Conservative Right. The story of the uses of the myth of Langemarck will be told later (chapter 4), but the examination of the myth itself is not yet complete. The myth of Langemarck was not, in fact, an entirely innocuous one. Even though its primary connotations were limited and apolitical, there were other, more dangerous connotations that must not be overlooked. It was these connotations which slowly moved from the background to the foreground as the myth of Langemarck changed from an apolitical fantasy to a National Socialist rallying cry. These implications were not produced by the Nazis; rather, they lay latent within the myth of Langemarck from the beginning.

The “field of meanings” within which the myth marched was primarily that outlined by the youth movement: the youth depicted in the myth of Langemarck, though not necessarily the soldiers in the actual battle, were those of the youth movement. As a result of that movement, by 1914 youth was connected to a Romantic tradition that was largely set against modern rationalism. The language of youth harked back to an imagined time of chivalry when German character was more clearly

²⁸ Ketelsen, 76 (es rückte ein in ein schon präexistentes Feld von Bedeutungen).

²⁹ Ketelsen, 79 (...entfaltete das Motiv keinerlei eigene produktive Dynamik; es war ausschließlich repetitiv. Es setzte keine produktive Phantasie frei; immer und immer wieder werden seine drei Elemente: Jugend, Nation, Opfer (und deren immanente Negationen: Establishment, Gesellschaft, Materialismus) in den einmal festgelegten Bahnen wiederholt.).

expressed in its honor and valor. Through the Wandervögel, youth was connected with nature over against the urban world. The emphasis on nature was increased during the War; wartime poetry and wartime postcards both focused on nature as a supposed Arcadia, a refuge from the filth of the front and the city. For the Germans, writes George Mosse, “nature symbolised the genuine, sadness and resurrection—but always, at the same time, a piece of eternity that could be personally appropriated and that legitimised wartime sacrifice.”³⁰ Hermann Löns had written in 1910 of the superiority and power of nature, imminent in and transcendent of civilization: “What is culture, what meaning does civilisation have? A thin veneer underneath which nature courses, waiting until a crack appears and it can burst into the open.”³¹ Nature, which was connected to youth, was held against the limitations and weakness of modern society.

Detlev Peukert holds that “the mystique of ‘youth’ was a more pervasive part of public consciousness in the Weimar Republic than it was in other contemporary societies or than it had been in other periods of German history.”³² This valorization of youth (and nature) was not unconnected to a rejection of rationalist society. Many looked to the energy of youth to provide a new, better world in the place of the fallen Empire and the lifeless Republic. Langemarck was remembered because it was seen as an example of the willingness of youth to give themselves to their country; it was a signal of hope for the future. If the students at Langemarck had been sacrificed, they had accepted it with equanimity and patriotism, singing as they marched to certain death. The battle was not notable because six machine guns were captured, but rather because it expressed the eagerness of youth to serve the nation in its time of need.

On the surface, the youth of Langemarck were unconnected to political forces. The myth expressed a Romantic longing for the past that was not easily converted into action. Hans Schwarz wrote in 1932 about Langemarck that “one does not die so joyfully and lavishly only to be used for

³⁰ George L. Mosse, “War and the Appropriation of Nature,” in Volker R. Berghahn and Martin Kitchen, eds., *Germany in the Age of Total War* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1981), 105.

³¹ Quoted in Mosse, “War and the Appropriation of Nature,” 107.

³² Peukert, 89.

politics.”³³ Some historians have agreed with him; Bernd Hüppauf, after studying the myth of Langemarck, concludes that it was a “continuation of the apolitical tradition of the middle classes in pre-war Germany.”³⁴ In emphasizing spontaneity, individualism, and personal responsibility, it went contrary to the values of hierarchical militarism. The connections that tied youth to a rejection of society, though, argue against this interpretation. The myth of Langemarck evoked the strong emotions surrounding the issue of youth in Germany; not the least of those emotions was a profound dissatisfaction with the *status quo*. At the same time that youths were being praised for their patriotism, many “were seeking release from rootlessness and lack of hope by joining totalitarian movements.”³⁵ The myth of Langemarck, echoing the *völkisch* sentiments of the Wandervögel, elevated a pure vision of Germany over the practical realities. One nationalist later wrote, “The German student is *völkisch*, and no one knows better than the German student of today that—Langemarck was *völkisch*.”³⁶

It was not insignificant that the backward-looking myth of Langemarck opposed the *status quo*. One of the Weimar Republic’s greatest problems was that of legitimacy. Many of its supporters tolerated it only for lack of better alternatives; few looked to the Republic as an achievement of which to be proud. A Romantic myth that emphasized a different, better time and a different, better culture could only exacerbate this lack of legitimacy. The supporters of Weimar could not mobilize any similar myths, and this failure was a sign of the Republic’s weakness. Perceiving this absence of an emotional core, Adolf Bartels wrote in 1920 that the supporters of the republic “have spiritually nothing and are spiritually nothing.”³⁷ The Republic was seen by many as separate from the real German, the Germany of youth, sacrifice, and patriotism. Ernst von Salomon characterized the split between the Republic and “Germany”:

³³ Quoted in Hüppauf, 55.

³⁴ Hüppauf, 55.

³⁵ Peukert, 95.

³⁶ Quoted in Ketelsen, 87 (Der Deutsche Student ist völkisch, und keiner weiß besser als der Deutsche Student von heute, daß – Langemarck völkisch war.).

³⁷ Adolf Bartels, “The Struggle of the Age,” in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, eds., *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 124.

The word stood wrapped in deep gloom, weather-beaten, beckoning, full of secrets, beaming magical powers, felt and not yet recognized, loved and not yet bidden to them. And the word was Germany. Where was Germany? In Weimar? In Berlin? Once it had been on the front line, but the front fell apart. Then it was supposed to be at home, but home deceived.... Where was Germany?... Was it in the state? But the state sought its form garrulously and found it in renunciation.³⁸

Finally, this radical rejection of conventional society was combined with a desire to build “new men.” Just as the youth movement was involved in the task of human transformation, Langemarck was seen as the site of the birth of new men. Hans Thimmerman in 1938 remembered the battle of Langemarck, saying that “it was around this hour that they became men.... It was too late, but it took place anyway. Those still living installed themselves in bushes, hid themselves from view with leaves, nestled against the earth. And shot. And shot.”³⁹ These men were not like others; rather, they were like the model that Ernst Jünger proposed, a man “of an entirely new breed, cunning, strong, purposeful. He is audacious, battle-hardened and merciless in his demands both of himself and others.”⁴⁰ The notion of “new men” as used by the youth movement was not perhaps inherently dangerous, but it became so in the heightened world of interwar politics. In the hands of extremists, the idea of building “new men” often coincided with removing the old.

Langemarck was not synonymous with Nazism, or at least not until the 1930s. Rather, it was a myth about the War situated within a largely predetermined set of meanings that, despite its historical inaccuracy, evoked strong emotions within many Germans. This resonance, located primarily in the emphasis on youth in a context of noble sacrifice and patriotism, contributed to the ubiquity that Langemarck was to achieve in the interwar years. Even in its purest form, though, the myth of Langemarck was open to divergent interpretations and uses; the most obvious and common interpretation was apolitical and repetitive, but the myth, with its emphasis on the destabilizing power of youth and the necessity of transforming society, could also be mobilized for more aggressive

³⁸ Ernst von Salomon, “The Outlawed,” in Kaes, Jay, and Dimendberg, 25.

³⁹ Hans Thimmerman, “Der Sturm auf Langemarck,” in Hans-Jochem Gamm, *Führung und Verführung*, 247-8 (Und um diese Stunde ist es gewesen, daß sie Männer geworden sind.... Es war zu spät, aber es geschah trotzdem. Was noch lebend war, baute sich in Sträuchern ein, machte sich aus Rübenblättern einen Schutz gegen Sicht, schmiegte sich an, Erde an Erde. Und schoß. Und Schoß.).

⁴⁰ Stachura, 51.

purposes. The history of the legacy of Langemarck, which will be traced in chapter 4, details how these aggressive connotations of the myth were gradually brought to the forefront and eventually adopted and adapted into a Nazi ideology that, while generally rejecting regressive Romanticism, seized upon the powerful resonance the myth of Langemarck had for the people of Germany.