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MI5 Papers Show Britain Feared Nazi 'Spyclists'

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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LONDON (AP) -- Clouds of war were gathering over Europe, and the English police officer was concerned. A group of black-clad Germans had been spotted heading for London -- by bicycle.

Newly declassified British intelligence files reveal the ripples of alarm that spread through the country as Hitler Youth cyclists toured Britain in 1937. Reports of sightings poured in from local police amid fears the teenagers might be two-wheeled "spyclists" scouting the country for a future invasion.

"The general image of fit young Germans with blond hair and leather shorts cycling through parts of England where nothing much had happened for years created quite a stir," said Christopher Andrew, author of the official history of MI5, Britain's domestic espionage service.

The Hitler Youth group aimed to instill the Nazis' racist and xenophobic ideals into young Germans, through a mix of indoctrination, outdoor activities and military-style training. Before World War II, members of the group visited Britain, and MI5 documents released Monday by the National Archives show that its leaders sought closer ties with the Boy Scout movement.

The dossier's dispatches about the group's activities in Britain read like a spy thriller -- apart from the Boy Scouts and Rotary Club suppers.

One memo, sent by police Superintendent T. Dawson of Spalding, central England, to his superiors, is headed "Party of young Germans en route for London."

"I respectfully beg to inform you that a party of German youths arrived at Spalding on Friday the 30th of July 1937," he wrote. "They were entertained by the Spalding Rotary Club and camped for the night in Fulney Park, leaving the following morning and traveling south."

He enclosed a clipping from the local newspaper, which failed to convey much sense of menace. It recounted how "the homey atmosphere familiar at an English fireside at the Christmas season prevailed when the Spalding Rotary Club entertained a party of German youths to a sausage-and-mashed potato supper."

Another police report warned that the Germans were "in possession of cameras" and had been seen taking pictures.

Another document described how a Hitler Youth group was kept under surveillance as it arrived at London's Liverpool Street station, dressed in black shorts, brown shirts, backpacks and "various pictorial Scout movement

badges." The undercover agent reported that "there was no untoward incident" as the Germans took the subway across town.

However, organized groups of Hitler Youth also toured other nations in the 1930s that eventually became the victims of Nazi aggression, such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Yugoslavia. They reportedly took part in reconnoitering roads and bridges and in other activities that helped the Nazis map their invasion routes.

Still, the MI5 spy agency did not appear to have been overly alarmed by the Hitler Youth presence. MI5 chief Vernon Kell responded to one report on the cyclists with a note: "Should they come this way, which is unlikely, I will let you know any information that I can obtain."

However, MI5 did keep an eye on the Hitler Youth in the years before Britain and Germany went to war in 1939, and investigated reports that German cyclists had been advised to memorize terrain and landmarks "for the benefit of the Fatherland."

That idea turned out to have come from exaggerated newspaper reports, one of which was headlined "Nazis must be spyclists."

British spies also tracked the group's efforts to forge ties with Britain's Boy Scout movement, with which it shared a fondness for shorts and outdoor exercise, though not a fascist ideology.

The file records a trip to Britain by Hitler Youth chief of staff Hartmann Lauterbacher and Nazi officials that included a visit to an army physical training school.

"I noted that their party smoked and drank double whiskies, and I wondered whether they did this when they were with the Hitler Youth," a British official observed.

The visitors also dined with Robert Baden-Powell, founder of the scouting movement, who reported that Lauterbacher had invited him to meet Hitler. He told Lauterbacher that "I was fully in favor of anything that would bring about a better understanding between our nations," but sought official advice on what attitude to take toward the German advances.

MI5 was noncommittal, hoping to use links with the Hitler Youth to get information on German activities.

By 1944, British spies were under no illusions about the nature of the group, whose members were increasingly being mobilized as troops to make up for heavy German casualties in the war.

"The Hitler Youth is not a Boy Scout or Girl Guide organization," said MI5's 1944 handbook on the organization, underlining the word "not."

"It is a compulsory Nazi formation, which has consciously sought to breed hate, treachery and cruelty into the mind and soul of every German child. It is in the true sense of the word, 'education for death.'

"Under no circumstances should the Hitler Youth be taken lightly."