

## Preface

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In 2008, when I started my research, I was a total stranger to the history of the German youth movement. At least I did know that there had been (and still is) a youth movement in Germany, that it had significant cultural influence and that it left behind a great variety of primary sources. When an earlier topic for my research proved to be untenable due to a lack of sources, the youth movement came to me as – one might say – destiny. A first visit to Ludwigstein Castle in Hesse, where the youth movement's archives are housed, provided an immediate introduction to youth movement culture as I sat beside the campfire singing German folk songs with youth movement 'seniors'. The experience was heart-warming and alienating at the same time, as I felt welcomed as a foreign guest, but also felt like an intruder, impeding the rites and customs of old friends reuniting. After explaining the next day to Jürgen Reulecke what my intended research would focus on, he started elaborating on his own childhood experiences in the youth movement, concluding that I should not forget 'experience' (*Erlebnis*). Puzzled if he meant his own childhood experiences or my experiences that weekend, I only realized later that it must have been experience *per se*. Experience would become a key concept in my analysis, and had I not been grasped by my own experience of hospitality and intrusion I would possibly have missed the importance of pre-rational experience and its consequences for historical thought.

Yet, the completion of this study is not only the result of experience. It is the result of tiresome labour, of reading and re-reading sources and literature, of mastering the meaning of the specific idiom of a foreign youth culture, of tracing unavailable books and articles, of writing and re-writing notes and chapters, and of very few moments of enlightenment. As solitary as the work of a historian may seem, he cannot do without a supportive environment. Therefore, I would like to thank my wife Maaïke, my family and friends. A few good laughs with them kept me living in the present.

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