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Becoming Evil: The Shaping of a Nazi Female Consciousness from Weimar through the Third Reich

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Becoming Evil: The Shaping of a Nazi Female Consciousness from
Weimar through the Third Reich

by

Maria Murphy

A Thesis
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The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
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Approved by:

Alejandro Gomez del Moral, Ph.D., Thesis Advisor
Department of History

Kyle Zelner, Ph.D., Chair
Department of History

Ellen Weinauer, Ph.D., Dean
Honors College

Abstract

Notorious concentration camp guards or *Aufseherinnen*, such as Irma Grese and Ilse Koch, partook in some of the most heinous acts that the regime of Adolf Hitler perpetrated during the Holocaust. In her capacity as a guard at camps such as Auschwitz and Bergen Belsen, Grese frequently severely beat prisoners with her riding crop and participated in the selection of victims sent to the gas chambers. Koch, meanwhile, as a wife of a high-ranking officer of the elite Schutzstaffel (SS) paramilitary division of the Nazi regime, engaged in the sadistic practice of choosing of prisoners to be skinned and made into trinkets and handbags for her personal use. These two women and countless others like them facilitated the systematic persecution, incarceration, and execution of countless individuals that the Nazi regime had pronounced “undesirable” – what we have since remembered as the Holocaust. This thesis examines how seemingly ordinary German women were turned into hardened killers by chronicling women’s lives from the onset of the ostensibly liberal Weimar Republic in 1919 through the height of the Holocaust under the rule of Hitler’s Third Reich. Additionally, it argues that through political strife, economic turmoil in Germany, and an intensive program of indoctrination in Nazi ideology, German women were shaped into willing perpetrators of the Holocaust. This thesis seeks to further the research of women’s participation in the Final Solution by providing an explanation to the shaping of their consciousness, a subject neglected by historians to date.

Keywords: Weimar Germany, Germany’s Suffrage, Nazi Women, Nazi Ideology, Irma Grese, Ilse Koch

Dedication

For my Dad.

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List of Abbreviations

SDP	Social Democratic Party
BDF	Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine
KPD	Communist Party
NSDAP	National Socialist German Worker's Party
NSF	National Socialist Women's League
BDM	League of German Girls
SA	Sturmabteilung
SS	Schutzstaffel
WWII	World War Two

Introduction

They called her “The Beautiful Beast of Belsen.” Irma Grese was a guard at the Ravensbrück, Auschwitz, and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps, which were key institutions by which Adolf Hitler’s Nazi regime (1933-1945) perpetrated the Holocaust – that is, the mass persecution and extermination of over 11 million Jews and other individuals deemed “undesirable” by the Nazis. The Holocaust not only brought about the mass murder of Jews, Gypsies, political outcasts, and countless others who opposed Nazi views, but tore families apart and did irreparable damage to those who survived. Yet, while historians have extensively studied this period, relatively few have examined the roles that women like Grese played, and still less has been written on how these women came to occupy those roles. This thesis aims to remedy this by taking a broad view of evolving attitudes on women’s public engagement from the Weimar Republic through the Third Reich to determine how a German female consciousness developed that led some of these women to become active participants in the Holocaust.

More specifically, this thesis seeks to answer an as-yet open question regarding what drove German women to commit the acts they perpetrated during the Holocaust. It argues that through the Weimar Era of Germany, a feminine conscience developed that would come to underpin women’s involvement in the Final Solution. By obtaining the right to vote, women became politically active and pursued equal rights in all aspects of life. Women’s newfound assertiveness created a “New Woman,” which would reshape German society. Many German women remained adamantly opposed to the emergence of this “New Woman,” and to gender equality. Crucially, though, those who were open to these social changes were members of the younger generation that would become

complicit in the Nazis' crimes a decade later. Irma Grese herself, for instance, was just fifteen years old when she became a concentration camp guard – barely older than Hitler's regime.

And while Grese's name is not as popularly synonymous with the Holocaust as is Adolf Hitler's, the efforts of myriad ordinary Germans like her were essential to the establishment and function of the Nazi racial state. Moreover, women like Grese were arguably only able to contribute in the public ways they did thanks to the trailblazing that Weimar-era feminism had done in making the public sphere open to women. For indeed, once in power, the Nazi state called on myriad ordinary German women to serve as nurses, secretaries, and other perhaps innocuous positions. But they were not innocuous, and while some Germans shouldered their duties reluctantly, seeing this as the burden of living in the Reich, others like Grese enthusiastically embraced the new Nazi way of life. Most disturbingly, while it is tempting to think of those who made this last choice – to become perpetrators – as somehow inhuman, scholars like Christopher Browning have underlined that even these most troubling of figures were ultimately fairly ordinary – anyone, Browning argued, is capable of atrocity given the right conditions.¹ And so this begs the question that is central to this thesis: how could a mass of commonplace Germans act out the violence of the Holocaust? Browning has sought these answers for Germany's men; this thesis seeks the same for its women.

More specifically, the place of German women like Irma Grese was of central concern to the racialized society that the Nazi regime sought to construct, and their

¹ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

contributions to the Final Solution were similarly key. Notwithstanding, the work of women like Grese who worked in the concentration camps has not always been recognized by scholars, as these women were not members of the paramilitary wing of the Nazi state charged with implementing the Final Solution, the Schutzstaffel (SS); they were instead civilian employees of the SS. And moreover, because employing these women in positions outside traditionally feminine roles would have gone against Nazi ideology and been contradictory to Hitler's beliefs, they typically were not engaged in direct persecution of camp prisoners like male camp guards; rather, they served as nurses or secretaries and in some cases were married to SS officers, as in the case of Ilse Koch, spouse of Buchenwald Commandant Karl-Otto Koch. Such gender roles as these were not however uniquely German. German women, like many other women in different parts of the world, still struggled with their place in the political sphere.

Gender roles in early 20th century Germany were not unlike those in many other regions. Women in Germany gained the right to vote in 1919 under the Weimar Constitution.² This right opened new opportunities for women in Germany in relation to employment. Women were able to work in factories, as miners, or drivers, as well as other positions previously thought of as men's roles. Through this empowerment, women came to be viewed differently by German society, and the concept of "The New Woman" emerged. This "new woman" wore her hair shorter, became less focused on family life, and focused primarily on the present rather than looking toward the future.³

² Claudia Koonz, *Mother's in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1987), 29.

³ Robert G. Moeller, *The Nazi State and German Society; A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford St. Martin's, 2010), 33.

These new developments under the Weimar Constitution opened spaces for German women to be, and to be viewed as, more than simply wives and mothers.

By contrast, Nazi attitudes towards women's public involvement are less clear, and at times seemingly even contradictory. Under National Socialist doctrine, women were meant to be uninvolved in politics, but were at the same time expected to be well-versed in Nazi ideology and politics, so that they might raise their sons to become faithful soldiers in the SS, and their daughters to be dutiful Aryan wives and mothers. To spread their gender ideology, the Nazi party founded a National Socialist Women's League, or NS-Frauenschaft in 1931.⁴ This organization sent women to bride schools, instructed them on the proper use of German-made products, and put them through cooking classes to name just a few of the group's initiatives. It introduced a magazine, titled *Frauen-Warte*, which became the Nazi's largest base of propaganda for women. This propaganda included what the party (and later, the regime) expected from women in support of the Nazi cause.

This strictly domestic state of affairs came to an end, however, with the opening of Ravensbrück concentration camp in late 1938, which would prove to be a pivotal moment for women in the Third Reich. Ravensbrück became the largest primarily female concentration camp to figure in the Holocaust. Because of Nazi ideology on the specificity of gender roles, with women viewed as the weaker sex, the camp was overseen by SS men, but was guarded exclusively by women. In consequence, this camp

⁴ Claudia Koonz, *Mother's in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1987), 116.

served as the womb that formed the female guards who committed some of the worst atrocities perpetrated by women during the Holocaust.

In 1942, Ravensbrück became a training camp for female guards, some of whom would go on to be employed at Auschwitz. The evidence of the violence in Ravensbrück camp is evident through the testimony of witnesses during the World War Two (WWII) War Trials. Witnesses testified to seeing Irma Grese carry around a whip to randomly beat prisoners as well as walking the camp with vicious canines to randomly attack innocent prisoners. At another, especially infamous camp – Buchenwald – Ilse Koch, a wife and mother of two, selected prisoners whose tattoos she found interesting, had them skinned, and commissioned personal items such as lamp shades and hand bags to be made from the flayed flesh. Grese and Koch are only two examples of what German women were capable of; there are many more violent women in Nazi history whose complicity during the Final Solution is rarely discussed.

Yet, as noted above, women's involvement in the construction of the Nazi racial state and complicity in the Final Solution has only relatively recently gained attention from scholars. Until as recently as the 1980s, historians had largely failed to consider the possibility that women could have participated actively and enthusiastically in implementing Nazi social and racial policy, including policy on gender. Because of gender roles of women during the time, women were thought to have been victims of the Third Reich. That is until notable historians began to take a closer look at these female perpetrators.

Claudia Koonz's pivotal *Mother's in the Fatherland* was the first study to delve into detail on the role of women in the Nazi state. Koonz described views and

experiences during the period of “Weimar Emancipation,” offering an in-depth investigation into women’s roles in various organizations and religious entities, as well as interviews representing two different perspectives on the events she examined. One interview is with Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, the head of a Nazi organization, and the other a Jewish survivor of The Third Reich, Jolana Roth. These two interviews will give insight into two strikingly different experiences of World War II. Koonz furthers the discussion of women’s active participation in the Holocaust with *The Nazi Conscience*.

The Nazi Conscience opened the discussion of Germany’s view that they were superior, both morally and racially. This German superiority concept, led German’s to believe they had a justified right to exterminate those who they deemed inferior. Koonz explains that rather than claiming a racial superior state, Hitler made claims of racial supremacy with concepts such as, Volksgemeinschaft (ethnic community), Volkskorper (the ethnic body politic), and Volksseele (ethnic soul). Through the examination of these concepts scholars have gained a better understanding of women’s motivation to partake in the Nazi cause. Koonz argued that even though the Nazi’s actions seem highly immoral today, they were in actuality following the ideology of National Socialism and its moral standards; only gradually did they morph into extermination⁵. In each chapter she delves into the Nazi morality with Hitler as its head, going into detail each aspect of German life, school, work, politics, SS, and so on. This gives acumen to this thesis about German life of the 1930s and 1940s. Koonz’s objective in her work was to open the discussion of women’s true involvement in the horrors of the Holocaust and the views of the true evils they exhibited while delving into the feminist aspect of it all. Koonz uses

⁵ Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2003).

many previously unexplored primary sources, published works, interviews, and other various documents to back her claims of female violence. Missing from Koonz's work however are Nazi attitudes on gender and sexuality.

The questions of the sexuality of Nazism and post war eras is explained in Dagmar Herzog's *Sex after Fascism*. Herzog's examination takes place from the 1930s to the present day. She explores Nazi sexual agendas and breaks down the myths that Nazi's were sexually repressed. She will come to the conclusion they were in fact not repressed but rather progressive. By removing the taboos on sexual desire, with limitations, namely homosexuality, the Nazi's essentially cut off all taboos on killing. Herzog then delves into post war Christian views on Nazi sexuality by linking Nazi's racially pure promiscuity to the violence they inflicted on the Jewish people. Herzog likens her theory to the era of the 1950s when sexuality was not spoken of and the effects this had on the children who came of age in the late 60s. Through her work, Herzog finds the link to the history of sexuality to the history of religion⁶. Herzog's largest contribution concerns the vast control that sex exerted on West Germany. Through Herzog's work, this thesis examines Nazi women's sexuality and the role it played in their involvement in extermination.

Renate Bridenthal's book *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* further explores how gender ideology and sexuality had an impact on German women's involvement in the Third Reich. Bridenthal's work seeks to combat the view that women were passive historical subjects, as with their involvement in the Holocaust. *Becoming*

⁶ Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Visible provides insight on if and how cultural and economic conditions affected German women, prior to, during, and after World War II. This work also offers a sense of the impact of gender ideology during the Nazification process and how this impacted the views on women. *Becoming Visible* breaks down gender bias and reveals women's true role in significant moments throughout history. The parts that women played in historical watershed moments are often overlooked, as this thesis underlines; *Becoming Visible* similarly recognizes this oversight and exposes it. The editors use past works and documents to support their evidence of feminism's true role throughout history.

An original and telling work of oral histories of twenty-seven women who lived during Germany's Third Reich is that of Alison Owing with her work, *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich*. Owing's work represents an even more striking example of such use of previously unexamined sources. What sets her apart from other historiographical authors is the fact that she is a journalist not a historian. With this distinctive aspect, her work takes on a different view and gives the reader a more intimate experience with her primary source base, lending her in particular the ability to ask very simply of her interviewees, "What did you know and when did you know it?"⁷ Owing sought out to find what guilt these women may admit to. The culpability these women displayed varied, but the common thread was the responsibility that they themselves placed exclusively on the times they lived in, and self-preservation, giving more emphasis to women as victims. Owing's interviews are all her own, they are personal,

⁷ Alison Owing, *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

intimate conversations she had with women who lived and experienced the Third Reich. These interviews provide a personal view of women who lived through the Third Reich.

Most recently, Wendy Lower has cemented the fact of German women's active involvement in Hitler's Final Solution with her work *Hitler's Furies*. Lower provides a detailed account of thirteen women involved in the Nazi killing field. These women came from different backgrounds and held different positions during WWII. Lower's research provides new insight into women's lives under National Socialism as she seeks to counter the assumption that women of the Third Reich were mere victims. Lower breaks the veil of victimization of German women in *Hitler's Furies* by providing stories of women committing evil and violent acts during the extermination period. She also probes into what motivated these women to become, as they would later be referred to as, monsters. Lower provides accounts of their actions during Germany's Eastern advancement as well as their fate post war. Her research has taken her to Germany and parts of Poland, to the United Nations Archives as well as the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. By detailing these thirteen women's lives, Lower has opened the discussion to begin seeking the reasons behind German women's motivation to become active members in the "Final Solution."

This thesis adds to the discussion by providing additional insight into what drove these women to become actively involved in the Nazi killing fields and the consequences of their involvement. Like prior work by scholars such as Koonz and Lower, it examines the extent to which German women were actively involved in Hitler's Third Reich, including the roles they played in the Nazis' pursuit of the Final Solution. But it also moves backward in time to trace the development in the Weimar era

of spaces for public action that, following the 1933 Nazi takeover of power and the turn toward extermination of social undesirables in the late 1930s and early 1940s, made the careers of women like Ilse Koch and Irma Grese possible. In particular, it explores gender discourses that preceded Nazi atrocities committed shortly before and during the Second World War, and traces how and whether these discourses impacted women's involvement in the Holocaust. It also seeks to provide insight into the genderization, or the composition of gender-based distinctions, of women in the years of and preceding the Third Reich.

The methods of research used consist of critically assessing primary source documents as well as secondary sources. Primary source materials include, speeches by Hitler as well as Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, and female political influencers. The themes of questions that run throughout this thesis include: fundamentals of German women's movements to include various topics of feminism; the development of "motherly politics," meaning the role of women in politics based on the Nazi ideal of motherhood; and finally, the genderization of Nazi women of interwar Germany as well as Germany as controlled under the Third Reich. Again, in particular, this work examines these themes through the deeds of German women during World War II, most notably after the opening of the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp, paying specific attention to the women who ran the camps.

Chapter One analyzes interwar women's movements in Germany. This chapter discusses the emergence of feminist groups, women's right to vote under the Weimar Constitution of 1919, and the appearance of women's political involvement is examined. This chapter also describes the surfacing of "motherly politics" and the effects of

gendered language on the perception of German society. The intent of Chapter One is to provide a historically accurate account of women's empowerment versus marginalization (the social disadvantage of women as well as the Nazi ideal that women are inferior to men) or genderization that existed in an interwar Germany.

Chapter Two examines Nazi attitudes towards women versus Hitler's personal take on women in politics as well as his hypocrisy towards this involvement. Primary sources are critically examined for Hitler's opinion of German women as compared to Nazi's as a whole, to include a speech given by Hitler at The Women's National Socialist convention. This chapter portrays Hitler and the Third Reich's demeaning attitude towards women, as well as their ultimate admission of women into actively participation in exterminationism.

The third chapter focuses on women during World War II. With a look at women's professions during the war, detailing the opportunities available to women, as well as the means the Third Reich used to propagandize these opportunities with reference to German propaganda geared towards women that was used. Chapter Three chronicles the opening of Ravensbrück, the largest female concentration camp, manned generally by women but still overseen by men. The significance of Ravensbrück is ultimately the shaping of the Nazi women during their time there. This chapter uses historiographical books as well as documents from the interwar period and during World War II, with much focus on trial testimony for actual accounts of the shocking evils these women guards committed, some which led to their reassignment to larger camps such as Auschwitz. By detailing these accounts, my research seeks a better understanding of what drove these women to evil.

Finally, this thesis bases its conclusions on evidence uncovered by analysis of texts, documents, and propaganda leaflets, with the aim of answering the following questions: how, if at all, did women's activism open the door to female involvement in exterminationism? Was women's active involvement in the Holocaust another card that Hitler played to consolidate uncontested power over German society, or how did this otherwise follow from Nazi ideology? The goal of this thesis, once again, is to form an understanding of what led to such atrocities committed by women of Nazi Germany.

Chapter One: Weimar and Women

Interwar Germany was faced with many problems, chief among them the consequences of the Treaty of Versailles, whose signing in June 1919 officially brought World War I to a close for the German people. And for the Germans, the consequences of this treaty soon proved overwhelmingly negative. Provisions included a reduction of Germany's military to just 100,000 men of all ranks; furthermore, the German military was not permitted any tanks, aircrafts, or large artillery pieces of any kind. Germany lost all of its overseas colonies, and the Rhineland was occupied by Allied forces for fifteen years, with Germany paying for the cost of the Allies occupation of the land. However, the most damaging condition of the treaty was the reparation payments Germany was required to pay.⁸

This reparation payment, later set at 132 billion gold marks in 1921, was nearly impossible for Germany to pay, leading to a drop in economic conditions when the German economy was already struggling. This came to a head with a drastic decline in the value of the German Mark in 1923-24. In fact, the Mark became worth so little due to hyperinflation that Germans began burning paper currency in fireplaces rather than buy firewood, as the wood was worth more than the currency. To further German's strife towards the Treaty of Versailles, Germans were forced to accept blame for the war.⁹ The "war guilt" clause of the treaty stated that Germany accepted blame for all loss of life

⁸ Treaty of Versailles

⁹ Catherine Epstein, *Nazi Germany: Confronting the Myths* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 11-13

during the war as well as for all damages incurred. This “war guilt” would become one of the leading causes for Germans to seek a new constitution.

As individuals, soldiers returned from the war bearing both the trauma of a humiliating loss, and, in many cases, shell-shock, a condition known today as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), only to find that their former jobs were now being held by women. This was one of the many consequences of these soldiers’ long absence: women had flooded into the workforce. For the first time, women occupied jobs formerly held exclusively by men, such as commercial driving, factory work, and mining. Women were also increasingly able to earn college educations during World War I.¹⁰ The Germany that soldiers returned to, then, was not the nation they remembered. And much to their dismay, not only had German women become active in all parts of society, but these women, who felt empowered by their new roles, were reluctant to simply give them up and return to their former family-oriented roles of marriage and motherhood as the nation’s returning veterans wished.

With traditional values so deeply rooted in German society, many disoriented by the social and political upheavals of the moment sought to regain a firm hold on their circumstance through a return to “motherly politics.” In simplest terms, this consisted of women restricting themselves to a passive involvement in politics; they were expected to be aware, but not directly involved. Women’s war efforts had diminished the prevalence of this traditional social ordering to some extent, as they had been forced to step into roles typically played by men, even while still caring for their children. But again, and

¹⁰ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, Family Life, and Nazi Ideology, 1919-1945* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986).

notwithstanding the hardship this double burden represented, the empowerment German women felt as a result of this new role was not something they were willing to give up easily. According to one socialist woman, “a horrible war broke out between male and female over bread and work.”¹¹

This fight between the men and women of Germany left women with a certain amount of guilt. Men returned from war, where they had risked their lives, to a mixed welcome from their female relations. These women in turn felt some amount of resentment following the soldiers return as well. During World War I, German women had been exposed to a massive propaganda campaign calling them to aid the fight by contributing on the home front. The propaganda had called on women to step into men’s roles in order to hold Germany together while the war raged. This propaganda was what had compelled women to join a previously exclusively male workforce. German propaganda had also encouraged women to seek a university education, something that was previous rare for a woman, especially a married woman. Though hesitant to give up these new opportunities, they were urged by male society to do just this and to suppress their newfound desire for a life outside of the home for the sake of the male veterans who had so sacrificed for the Fatherland – fodder for a sense of guilt that many women found themselves unable to entirely avoid. Thus, one female worker expressed this nagging sense of indebtedness and guilt in verse:

They go amidst the bullets for you.
In the evenings you read about it by lamplight.
They sleep stretched out in the wet grass.
Your nice warm bed is in front of you.
You can hug your loved ones close in your arms.
Dying, they see a foreign face.

¹¹ Ibid., 26

And all your love and all you pain,
Your warmest wishes cannot reach far enough
To make the last hour easier for those
Who die out there in murderous slaughter.¹²

This poem specifically illustrates women's cognizance of the sacrifices that men were making during the war. Yet, despite this awareness of wartime suffering and even though means existed for women who did not voluntarily return home to be dismissed from the workforce and universities, these new desires of women could and would not be so easily dispelled.

In this environment many Germans, women as well as men, welcomed the possibility of social, cultural, and political changes that might improve their current situation as well as the situation for Germany as a whole. Such a change seemed to arrive in Germany on August 14, 1919¹³ when the Weimar Constitution became law. With its passage, Germany became parliamentary democracy for the first time. But with that said, the new constitution did not necessarily bring radical changes to Germany; its aim was not to dismantle the old system of values or to limit recourse to motherly politics, but rather to grant a more nationalized spirit to the German government. Essentially the Weimar Constitution sought to uphold traditional values while adapting to the changes that modernity had imposed on German politics and society. These changes were brought about by those who sought progression and transition from the old regime of the

¹² Ibid., 26-27.

¹³ Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 5.

Kaiserreich who signed the Treaty of Versailles: Hermann Muller, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Empire and Dr. Bell, Minister of the German Empire.¹⁴

The new Weimar era sought to effect change to better German society in many ways. Most notable for Germany was the declaration in Article 17 that Germany was now a free state and all elections would be democratic.¹⁵ Most notable for German women however, was another portion of the same article, by which the Weimar Constitution extended suffrage to women.

Article 17 of the Weimar Constitution states “State parliament must be elected in a general, equal, immediate and secret ballot, in which all Reich German men and women participate, according to the principles of representative election.”¹⁶ The specific wording of “German men and women” left nothing open for debate – all Germans, including women, could now vote. Furthermore, women could partake in elections as candidates, and many women would. Women were also granted the same rights as men in Article 109:

“All Germans are equal in front of the law.
In principle, men and women have the same rights and obligations.
Legal privileges or disadvantages based on birth or social standing are to be abolished.”¹⁷

This new empowerment for women brought backlash from others who held firmly to motherly politics; abortions were still criminalized, and would remain that way, and women’s access to birth control was likewise still limited. Women were still expected to

¹⁴ Treaty of Versailles

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., Article 109

guard their homes and children from economic and social instability. At the same time women were granted access to a few aspects of the political sphere, education, health, culture, religion, and welfare.¹⁸ It is clear these political issues also tie into a woman's place in the public arena, as all aspects of political life to which women now gained access concerned issues that affected home life and children's upbringing. Thus, while the most liberal major party in the Reichstag, the Socialists, supported equal employment rights and benefits for unmarried as well as married mothers – a stance that resulted from the fact that Socialist women had more support from their male party colleagues than any of their counterparts in other political groups did – in the more conservative Catholic party, women instead largely voted in accordance with their husbands' wishes.¹⁹

The National Socialists, meanwhile, wanted no part of the woman question; as far as Nazism was concerned, there was no such question – a woman's place was in the home. This stood alongside other pillars of Nazi ideology: in broadest terms, they called for Weimar democracy to be dismantled for Germany's greater good, as well as measures to address what Hitler believed was the underlying cause of the nation's troubles, the Jews. In particular, Nazi thought maintained that Germany's financial problems could be traced back to the machinations of greedy, capitalist Jews who robbed the nation of its money, which meant that any emancipatory measures of which Jews could take advantage were unacceptable – and the National Socialists on occasion tied Jewish emancipation to Weimar's liberation of women. Hitler himself was also especially bitter about the terms of Germany's defeat in World War I, particularly the nation's forced

¹⁸ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, Family Life, and Nazi Ideology, 1919-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33-34

acceptance of sole responsibility for starting the conflict, the solution to which was again the destruction of Weimar democracy. Dismantling this corrupt system, his party maintained, was the only way to bring Germany out of its current economic and social downturn. However, their vision would not come to pass for some time as their numbers in the Reichstag paled in comparison to the more numerous parties, like the Socialists and the Communists.

This is not to say that the state of affairs for women under Weimar was especially emancipated. Constitutional guarantees for women were not always straightforwardly written and many German men (and women) still sought to uphold traditional values that included a denial of any real political voice to women. Thus, the women of the Catholic party were far from alone: though women in general gained the right to vote under the Weimar Constitution of 1919, a broad range of them, spanning much of the political spectrum, tended to vote according to their husbands' beliefs. The Nazi party counted only about half as many women as men among their members, and these tended to vote rigidly along a conservative National-Socialist line. Women married to socialists tended to vote socialist, as well, just as members of the Catholic party voted Catholic and so on. And in response, the political establishment tended to show apathy rather than respect toward the female population. Indeed, one Socialist woman opined that suffrage and political involvement had done little more than divide women.²⁰ Women, then, may technically speaking have been heard in political settings, but their requests were ignored.

Helene Grunberg of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) wrote in 1920 that in essence, because of Germany's system of Motherly Politics, women were unprepared and

²⁰ Ibid., 33-36

uneducated about Socialism; thereby causing them to fail in using the ballot correctly in the 1920 elections. She blamed this solely on men, calling male complaints about women's unreadiness for the ballot a case of, "big brother scolding little sister."²¹ The situation women were in could not be blamed solely on German men, however, as women under Weimar never sought to organize themselves politically or form any sort of political women's party. Instead they grew closer to their male counterparts, explaining their voting habits, and once again adopted their views and beliefs. They did not fight to be heard on a political stage or change old habits.

Three years after Grunberg's claims, which essentially argued that women were only unprepared for the vote due to a lack of education, Marie Juchacz made a speech that at once qualified and extended this argument, in which she proposed that education is not theoretical but takes place through action, and so women would only truly be able to learn politics if involved in the political arena. Juchacz also claimed that women, not men, would be to blame if socialism failed to reach the female population of Germany. She felt women would be morally responsible for this failure; she explains this failure by saying, "The best of our women comrades found it almost depressing when women got the vote, because they were aware of the failings of their own sex... failings which are rooted in a false kind of education."²² This false education she speaks of goes back to the idea that education comes through practice.

Over the course of the Weimar period (1919-1932), 112 women would gain this experience on the highest stage, serving in the Reichstag and making up between seven

²¹ Ben Fowkes, *The German Left and the Weimar Republic: A Selection of Documents* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015).

²² Ibid.

and ten percent of that body's total delegates.²³ While this seems a victory for women's rights it is important to note women's involvement in politics was limited. As mentioned previously women's involvement included only issues surrounding education, health, culture, welfare, and religion. German women were then met with a dilemma, were they to fully have equal rights with men or would they continue to be considered less than men, with their rightful place in the home.

Women would more extensively find their voice outside of the political arena with women's organizations. The leader in feminism, and the primary umbrella organization for feminist politics prior to and during the Weimar Constitution was the Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine (BDF). The BDF was an organization of middle class German women who introduced feminist thought to Germany in the late 19th century, and in time became an umbrella for a host of smaller women's leagues. Some of those organizations included: the Catholic Women's League of Germany, which supported the Center Party and included members such as Hedwig Dransfeld, a major participant in the Catholic Center Party and a member of the Reichstag, as well as Helene Weber who sat during the formation of the Weimar Constitution and would later speak out in opposition of Hitler's Enabling Act. For a time, a Protestant Women's League also formed part of the BDF as a counterpart to the Catholic Women's League, but it left the organization as early as 1919 due to its opposition to female suffrage.²⁴ Another subsidiary organization of greater note was the League of Jewish Women. This organization came from the first

²³ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, Family Life, and Nazi Ideology, 1919-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 30.

²⁴ Helen Boak, *Women in the Weimar Republic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

wave of feminism in Germany and sought to normalize Jewish traditions within German society.

In the end, however, the BDF too found its work compromised. During the rise of National Socialism, members of other women's organizations became subject to a new requirement that they turn in anyone affiliated with the League of Jewish Women. Earlier still, in the 1920s the BDF began to see any truly revolutionary potential eroded through the activities of anti-feminists such as Clara Mende, who sought to shift the focus of the group's activism toward the domestic sphere. Mende herself claimed that it was in her capacity of housewife that she was entitled to "administer the total property of this household [the BDF] and guide all of its members," adding that like-minded women had come to, "realize that we will win our rights only through large organizations!"²⁵ In time, the BDF became largely comprised of women's organizations that reduced the idea of women's rights to a right to protect domestic life. The BDF would ultimately disband in 1933 for fear of being controlled by the Nazis, as the National Socialist League of Women already was.

Significantly, these women's associations showed evidence of an uneven membership, which was missing a generation of German women. The relatively older women of the BDF were increasingly becoming more conservative, while women between twenty and thirty were uninterested in feminism due to a perception that struggles for women's rights had become passé, as these rights had largely already been won. One female law student, for instance, stated, "We are neither bluestockings nor

²⁵ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland; Women, Family Life, and Nazi Ideology, 1919-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 105.

crusader, nor rich or idle. The New Woman can be a genuine, one-hundred-percent woman now that women's rights have been won"²⁶ – a claim that was optimistic at best, given that few women attended university before World War I, and women's newfound rights were hardly well-entrenched in postwar German society. The new woman of Germany wanted both a career and family and gave little thought to the fact that these rights could and would be taken away.

This new woman, who first emerged in Germany during the 1920s, wore her hair shorter, was seen in the latest fashions, smoked in public, was freer sexually, and was often portrayed in the public eye as more masculine. One German publication founded in 1912, *Die Dame*, which initially published illustrations of fashion and advice on housekeeping, but pivoted in the 1920s to focus more on the new woman, endorsing her independence and career-mindedness. The magazine focused mainly on the successes of German women and included works of art, articles, and designs created by German women. The magazine became a popular publication among modern German women and in its 1926 publication reversed traditional gender roles by illustrating women in smoking jackets with shorter hair alongside males dressed similarly.²⁷ This new depiction of women further cemented their freer sexual identity and women became more open sexually.

The growing social visibility of this new, sexually emancipated German woman was further cemented by the decriminalization of prostitution in 1927. Women also began to have more access to contraceptives, and after 1927 vending machines selling condoms

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 35

²⁷ "Die Dame," Ullstein Publishing Company. January 01, 1926.

and other types of contraceptives began to appear in several places across Germany. With this easier access to prophylactics, woman gained more control over their reproductive lives. Concomitantly, , women during the Weimar period came to be viewed by the German public as more assertive, less focused on simply pleasuring her husband and increasingly entitled to seek pleasure of her own.²⁸ For instance, the following mid-1920s cartoon illustrates how women were beginning to assert their sexual power over men, showing a woman physically dominating a man both by riding him like a beast of burden, and by forcibly stripping him of part of his male wardrobe – his hat. Moreover, this woman is dressed in a risqué rendition of 1920s fashion, and wears the shorter hair that had by then become the vogue. This image is in direct contrast with the former depictions of women in magazines. In those images, women were depicted as mothers, cooks, timid dutiful wives, and most importantly, pictured as submissive to their husbands, typically implied by placing them in the foreground with the children, while the husband figure towered over his family – images that would become the norm again under the Third Reich. Here, by contrast, the woman is the dominating figure.

Figure 1: Assertive Weimar Woman²⁹

²⁸ Julie Roos, *Weimar Through the Lens of Gender: Prostitution Reform, Woman's Emancipation, and German Democracy, 1919-33* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

²⁹ Mel Gordon, *Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin* (Expanded Edition)" (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2006), p.54.



These “freedoms” included frequently attending cabarets, open homosexuality, and heightened drug use in Germany, most especially the use of cocaine. Cocaine had long been a part of German medicine, being used in surgical procedures and available by prescription. Its sale in pharmacies was banned in 1924 by the Weimar government but the drug soon became available on the black market. Indeed, images exist showing the drug being purchased openly on the streets of Berlin. Cocaine sales rose in 1927 and while the historical reasons for this increase have not been fixed in existing scholarship, it appears likely that the decriminalization of prostitution that took place that same year, and more broadly the heightened sexualization of German society of which this was part, contributed significantly.³⁰

Not all German women welcomed these social changes, and the new woman of Weimar met with backlash from several quarters. One such party not exactly supportive of this new feminine model, nor indeed of the woman question as a whole, was the German Communist Party (KPD). During the Weimar Republic, women made up only

³⁰ Ibid.

six percent of its delegates. The KPD did try to remedy this in 1930 by giving instruction that at least one third of its party should be female. And in some ways, the KPD did seem to support women's equality even in Weimar's early days, as shown by the prominent place several women occupied in its early leadership. In 1919, the KPD was led by famed female communist Rosa Luxemburg, and was later headed by another woman named Ruth Fischer from 1924-25. But while the KPD theoretically supported equality among the sexes, the party as a whole, including its female membership, was generally more concerned with the fate of German society.

In a speech given by Clara Zetkin to the Communist Party in 1920 she states that the women question can only be solved by first solving the larger social economic conditions of Germany society. Zetkin believed the only answer to this was to destroy capitalism and raise up communism. She sought to have women fight for the conquest of the proletariat, and to do this, women needed to be educated to become activists. Zetkin claimed that women in combat with men over employment did nothing but delay the ultimate goal, fighting the common enemy, "the exploiting capitalist."³¹ Zetkin herself was a major role player in the women's movement starting in the late 1890s. To further cement the communism's fight against capitalism, communists issued a listing of principles for agitated women. These principles spoke to how an agitated woman should fight alongside men for the ultimate goal of eradicating capitalism. These general principles, adopted by the KPD in 1920, gave a listing of how women should take part in trade-unions, train the under developed political skills of women, as well as how this

³¹ Ben Fowkes, *The German Left and the Weimar Republic: A Selection of Documents* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015).

training should be based upon a woman's character and class, and how propaganda campaigns should be composed.³²

The National Socialist German Worker's Party, or NSDAP, however, stood firm on their belief in "Motherly Politics." Hitler strongly opposed women's equality or anything of the sort. Hitler's stance had been the same from the beginning: men's triumph over women and the defeat of the Jew. In particular, he and his party argued that women who were stealing men's jobs were thereby destroying the German family, a turn of events that was unacceptable to the anti-Semites of the NSDAP. They instead believed that Germany's salvation lay in preserving the German people, or Volk, by cultivating racial purity, and further believed that women's liberation undercut this aim by allowing women to focus on herself and her career and so neglect her family. As Hitler himself put it in the 1920s, with the Weimar Republic still in full force: "The German girl [will] belong to the state and with her marriage become a citizen." Alternatively, he added, single women who carried out particularly important services for the Volk could also achieve citizenship; either way, though, Nazi thought saw citizenship for women not as a birthright but a privilege to be earned through marriage or national service.³³

With tensions ever mounting over the declining value of the German Mark and the division among women in the Reichstag, Germans began looking for a way out. Across the political spectrum – including the NSDAP but not most Communists or Socialists – there was consensus that women's emancipation under Weimar was an ill that needed to be fought in order to restore Germany's economic, social, and political

³² Ibid.

³³ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland; Women, Family Life, and Nazi Ideology, 1919-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 55.

strength. There are countless studies, books, articles, and journals on how and why Hitler and the National Socialist party became so powerful. But the pertinent question here is why these women on the verge of emancipation fell into line with the Nazi vision?

Chapter Two: The Rise of the Nazis

To first understand why National Socialism rose in Germany it is crucial to understand the social state of Germany just prior to 1933. Germany's economy was failing and unemployment was on the rise. Germans at the time were desperate for an answer to this plight. In addition to the social and economic strife, politics were becoming increasingly more aggressive. In 1932, an election year, political violence broke out in the streets of Germany. The choices and actions made during this election year would prove to be the downfall of Germany's first democracy, Weimar.

The Great Depression hit Germany especially hard. Germany's reparation payments were possible only through the financial assistance of the United States. When the U.S.'s economy collapsed they could no longer support Germany financially. With an economy already in shambles, Germany could no longer rely on support from the U.S. Without financing, production fell, thereby causing an unemployment crisis in Germany. The Weimar government was unequipped to handle such a crisis, enter the National

Socialists. The National Socialist Party, or the NSDAP, believed that a Führer principle was the answer. In its essence the Führer principle, with Hitler as the Führer, would mean Germany was Hitler and Hitler was Germany; to love Germany was to love Hitler and vice versa. This as well as the financial state of Germany would be the platform that Hitler would run on in March of 1932 against then-Reich President Paul von Hindenburg. But Hitler's hour had not yet come: he only won thirty percent of the vote.³⁴

In the summer of 1932, violence erupted in the streets of Germany with the SA as the aggressor against the SPD and KPD – in short, violence against the left. This violence also drove a wedge between the two leftist organizations, because the SA promoted a fear in both groups which prevented any united action against the NSDAP. With the elections of July 1932, the NSDAP garnered their largest political success thus far by winning 37.4% of the vote, granting them the majority vote in the Reichstag with 230 seats. Nevertheless, the party soon experienced their first real electoral setback in November of that same year, when the Nazis lost 34 Reichstag seats in a snap election. This was due to financial hardships the party was experiencing, as well as Hitler's own insistence on being named Chancellor; even going as far as saying he would quit politics if he was not awarded the Chancellorship. Hindenburg was wary to give the position to Hitler, but ultimately relented in January of 1933 upon the advice of ex-Chancellor Franz von Papen, who assured Hindenburg that he himself would be able to control Hitler if named Vice-Chancellor. Von Papen would almost immediately be proven wrong.³⁵

³⁴ Catherine Epstein, *Nazi Germany: Confronting the Myths* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015)

³⁵ Catherine Epstein *Nazi Germany: Confronting the Myths* (West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons, Ltd, 2015).

Figure 2.1 NSDAP Representations through Weimar ³⁶

Party Representation in the Reichstag of the Weimar Republic						
Party	May 1928	Sept. 1930	July 1932	Nov. 1932	Mar. 1933	Nov. 1933
National Socialist (Nazi)	12	108	230	196	288	661
German National Peoples	78	41	37	51	52	
German Peoples	45	30	7	11	2	
Economic	23	23	2	1		
Catholic Center	61	68	75	70	74	
Bavarian Peoples	17	19	22	20	18	
State (Democrats)	25	15	4	2	5	
Social Democrat (Socialist)	153	143	133	121	120	
Communist	54	77	89	100	81	
Other Parties	23	53	9	12	7	
Totals	491	577	608	584	647	661

On January 31, 1933 Hindenburg swore in Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany. Hitler finally achieved his ultimate goal, legal control. The legality of his control would always be of utmost importance to Hitler albeit the means by which he achieved this legality would be questionable. In February of the same year a fire broke out in the Reichstag. The Nazis were quick to blame Communists in an effort to overthrow the state. ³⁷ It is commonly thought by historians, however, that because this incident worked out so well for the Nazis and Hitler, it was likely in actuality a plot developed by the Nazis to further cement their power by convincing the public of an impending Communist overthrow. Through this fire, Hitler was able to secure Hindenburg's issuance of the Reichstag Fire Decree. The decree gave Hitler special emergency powers, which in practice gave Hitler and the Nazis a legal right to imprison all who opposed them. The party also leveraged these powers to abolish many civil

³⁶ John T. Marlin, "German Elections, 1933: How a Democracy Was Destroyed." Last modified March 5, 2017. Accessed on March 10, 2017 <http://cityeconomist.blogspot.com/2017/03/hitler-mar-5-1933-germany-elects-nazis.html>

³⁷ <https://www.usmmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007657>

liberties of the German people, including suspension of habeas corpus. Most importantly, it enabled the Reich cabinet to overthrow state and local governments. This would be a crucial step for the Nazis in gaining total control of Germany, for through the Reichstag Fire Decree Hitler was able to convince Hindenburg to sign into law the Enabling Act of 1933.

The Enabling Act, which would remain in effect throughout the Third Reich, gave the cabinet sweeping executive and legislative powers. Through the Enabling Act, the cabinet and most especially Hitler as Reich Chancellor no longer needed the Reichstag to pass legislation or enact laws for four years. By the time this period elapsed in 1937, Nazism was thoroughly entrenched, and the act was renewed without ado. In the meantime, the consequences of this legislation brought that social and political entrenchment to pass, as under the act's authority, the Nazis soon banned all parties save their own. The Enabling Act would also serve as a means for the Nazi party and Hitler to begin their policy of Gleichschaltung, by which they meant the Nazification of the German state and society, and which they accomplished via a series of laws that began to establish the Nazis' totalitarian control.³⁸

Non-Nazi parties would not be the only thing that Hitler would ban under the Enabling Act. Women were no longer permitted in the political arena – that was for men – no longer did they have multiple national news organs, only publications such as the Nazi approved *Frauen Warte*, and they were highly discouraged from working. This policy of exclusion is well illustrated by the case of the official banning of *Die Freundin*.

³⁸ Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1993).

First published in 1924 during the Weimar Republic, *Die Freundin* or “The Girlfriend,” was a German publication geared towards homosexual women. Nazi ideology unsurprisingly saw this as a threat to the patriarchal society they were constructing and banned the magazine in 1933.³⁹ In 1935, the Nazis would go a step further to ban homosexuality through a revision of paragraph 175 of the German criminal code, which now elevated homosexuality to an act of treason. At the time, criminal police inspector Josef Meisinger justified this move by arguing that, “homosexuals are useless for normal sexual intercourse...and will eventually lead to a drop in the birth rate...[making] homosexuality...a permanent threat to order in the life of the state.”⁴⁰ Meisinger’s words furthermore underscore the centrality of the mission of building a pure Aryan society to the Nazi party platform.

Hitler had never been shy about his feelings and views of women. When President Hindenburg died in 1934, female organization representatives were denied a place at his funeral. Some women were outraged over this, which they saw as an affront to the mothers of the Volk from a party that should have been indebted to women for their victory. Especially angered was National Socialist supporter and editor of Nazi women’s journal *Die Deutsche Kampferein*, Sophie Rogge-Borner. Borner was a militant Nazi, but also a feminist. She wrote articles addressing Hitler’s opposition to feminism, but they would all go unanswered. *Die Deutsche Kampferein* would itself be banned in due course

³⁹ Friederike Eigler, Susanne Kord, *The Feminist Encyclopedia of German Literature* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997).

⁴⁰ Speech by criminal police inspector Josef Meisinger at a meeting of ministerial civil servants in charge of health matters on April 5-6, 1937, in Berlin

in 1937, as the Nazi regime considered the magazine a threat to party ideology.⁴¹

Meanwhile, in a speech he gave to the National Socialist's Women's League in September of 1934, Hitler himself left little room for equivocation over his position on the subject of women in public life, clearly expressing a deep distaste for women serving any capacity outside of the home.

In this speech, the Führer called for "emancipation from emancipation." In describing the National Socialist's view of the women's movement, he stated that it was not proper to use the term "emancipation of women," as this was a Jewish term rooted in capitalist ideology; rather, Germany's goal should be the establishment of a "National Socialist Women's Movement." Hitler viewed this movement as representative of the natural course of society, in which man was out in public life supporting and protecting the family, while women remained in the home bearing children and preparing them for the battle of life. Hitler's ideology was thus: that the man's world was the larger world and the woman's the smaller, and that the larger world could not stand without the support of the smaller world. Hitler viewed the fundamental role of women as being to increase the population, and female involvement in all politics save "motherly politics" was consequently useless.⁴²

To further grow the population, the Nazis created the Lebensborn in 1935, with SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler at its head. The Lebensborn initiative included a call to all SS soldiers to father at least four children with a pure Aryan woman, which they were invited to do in or if necessary outside of wedlock, as well as a call to women to act

⁴¹ Leila J. Rupp, "Mother of the 'Volk:': The Image of Women in Nazi Ideology." *Sign* 3, no. 2 (1977): 362-79.

⁴² Hitler's Speech to the National Socialist's Women's League 1934

as volunteers to bear the children of these SS men. As an incentive to women who participated, the Nazi regime offered to build homes for them and the resulting children, which were termed Lebensborn houses. They also received financial support, birth documents certifying their progeny's racial purity, and even sought out adoptive parents for the children.⁴³ To be sure, some Nazi women expressed outrage over the program. Reber-Gruber, for instance, spoke out against the implications of this policy producing a population of unmarried women teachers. She scolded the Nazi organization for thinking it was right to teach kindergarteners morality by an unmarried pregnant teacher. The program angered to such an extent that she became quite outspoken about it, which would lead to her arrest and eventually lead to her expulsion from the Nazi Party.⁴⁴ And the Lebensborn was just one facet of the Nazi's eugenic program.

To further combat the budding feminist culture of the Weimar era, the new Nazi regime implemented a series of policies meant to emphasize motherhood as women's sole proper destiny and thus promote the creation of a pure Aryan Volk – a new and expanded expression of postwar “Motherly Politics.” One of the first laws the new regime passed was the Law of Encouragement of Marriage. Through this law, pure Aryans were given a loan of 1,000 marks with the option to keep 250 for every child they had. Hitler's idea behind this law was to have a high birth rate to increase the Aryan population. Furthermore, unmarried women could volunteer to have the child of an SS officer. The “Mother's Cross” (see Figure 2.2), first awarded in May of 1939, was designed as further incentive for women to have large families. A mother with four or

⁴³ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, Family Life, and Nazi Ideology, 1919-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 399-400.

five children earned a bronze cross, five to seven earned her a silver cross, and eight and over earned the gold cross. Additionally, women who had five children could choose a prominent government official as the child's godfather.⁴⁵

Figure 2.2 Example of "Mother's Cross"⁴⁶



Due to the number of children women were expected to produce, the Nazis enacted a policy of Gesundheitspflicht, or "the duty to be healthy." Women were expected to maintain their health to bore healthy German children. They were not permitted to be skinny, this was seen as unhealthy, and smoking was highly discouraged; so much so in fact, that the League of German Girls, a Nazi organization, circulated anti-smoking propaganda. Figure 2.3 is an example of Nazi propaganda geared towards women to discourage tobacco and alcohol. The script on the image translates to "Motherhood, soft cider, and Volkswagens: virtues of abstinence include healthy infants and savings, enough to buy two million Volkswagens." To further protect women's health, the Nazis implemented several Occupational Protections for Women, Children, and the unborn in Germany from 1933-1945. These protections included such things as height restrictions for female streetcar operators and banning pregnant women from work

⁴⁵ Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann and Marion Kaplan, eds. *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (New York: Monthly Review, 1984).

⁴⁶ http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=2044

that may expose them to dangerous substances, such as tobacco factories. This restriction came in the form of the “Maternal Protection Law.” This protected women from being fired for being pregnant and also restricted them from working six weeks prior to giving birth until six weeks after birth.⁴⁷ These protections and restrictions were designed to further promote a healthy, pure, German race.

The Nazis encouraged health in all aspects of life, there is no shortage of research done on the health of Germany as a state. The reasoning behind this goes back to the ideology of a pure Aryan race. To broaden the health of German society even further, the Nazis began a series of eugenic testing.



Figure 2.3 Nazi Propaganda for Women’s Health⁴⁸

Nazi eugenic testing began long before the Holocaust and is seen by many historians as a precursor for the Nazi euthanasia program during the Final Solution. In 1934, eugenic courts were established to ensure procreation only took place among those

⁴⁷ Robert Proctor, *The Nazi War on Cancer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 80.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

who were “worthy.” Those deemed unworthy were subjected to forced sterilization through the 1933 Sterilization Law which provided sterilization for a wide range of genetic defects and familial cancers. The purpose of the law was to prevent ailments from being passed on to future generations. In a 1934 article, Fischer-Wasels, a Frankfurt pathologist, stated, creating a healthy generation could only be achieved “by removing the heavily burdened families from the reproductive community, by preventing the combination and expression of afflicted genes.”⁴⁹ This process met with some backlash, however. To combat such opposition, the national chief of eugenics in 1934, Dr. Gross, explained to women, “What you are and what I am and what I can become in my whole life, that has been determined in part by my genetic inheritance.”⁵⁰ The Nazis firmly believed in this “genetic inheritance” as a way to secure a pure racial society. This was the belief behind the forced sterilization.

To force compliance with these racial standards, young women were taught racial science in school. This included memorizing the “Ten Commandments for Choosing a Partner.” These commandments were used as a tool to enforce the moral obligation of building a pure Volk nation and included instruction such as: “remain pure in mind and spirit,” “when choosing your spouse, inquire into his or her forebears,” “hope for as many children as possible,” and the number one commandment was “remember you are a German!”⁵¹ This indoctrination of the Volk, pure Germans, fortifies for women,

⁴⁹ Ibid, 69.

⁵⁰ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, Family Life, and Nazi Ideology, 1919-1945* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 189.

⁵¹ Ibid.

especially younger minds, that all other races are inferior. The Nazi indoctrination of women was accomplished through a highly popular women's league.

The Nationalsozialistische Frauenschaft ("National Socialist Women's League," abbreviated NS-Frauenschaft or NSF and established in 1931), was the only women's league recognized under the Nazi regime and was created in answer to the number of women's organizations that began to support the Nazi party in Weimar's twilight years. Believing that their support for Nazism would earn them special regard from the party following its victory, numerous women flocked to the NSF. Ultimately however, after Hitler's rise to power, German women found themselves not rewarded but subject to heavy-handed indoctrination in Nazi ideology at the NSF's hands. Former women leaders soon became aware after 1933 that their efforts had been wasted in supporting the Third Reich, as they were soon replaced by male leaders as the female leadership they represented was part and parcel of everything Hitler detested. They were ambitious, determined, and independent women. The Nazis could not afford a woman in power that represented these qualities; they needed the NSF to instead enforce their own vision of domestic femininity. More specifically, the regime needed and sought a woman who could, as the rare case of a female member of the National Socialist leadership class, could champion the values and ideologies of the Nazi regime to her fellow women. And the woman they chose for this task was Gertrud Scholtz-Klink.⁵²

At all ages, the Nazi ideal for women was service to the family, but more importantly, to the Reich. This was stated with particular force by Gertrud Scholtz-Klink. As the head of this organization, Gertrud Scholtz-Klink had a particular platform that she

⁵² Ibid.

sought to push on the minds of women. Klink was a staunch Nazi supporter and worked tirelessly to enforce the views of National Socialism of women's role in society. In one of her more famous speeches, "To Be German Is To Be Strong," she stressed the importance of women as not only mothers to their children but of the nation. Scholtz-Klink implored women that their service was not only as mothers but also their service was required in other capacities as well. She appealed to women through a sense of love for their children and through women's vanity of building a nation of which she could be proud of. She called to women to serve the Führer in any capacity she was able by saying, "Not only those women with children will become mothers of the nation, but rather each German woman and each girl will become one of the Führer's little helpers wherever she is, be it in the labor service, in a factory, at a university or in a hospital, at home or on the high seas."⁵³

Alongside the NSF and extending the Nazi Party's reach to women too young to join the offered women's division of the party, the NSDAP operated a parallel organization, the BDM. To enforce this labor service among young women, the Bund Deutscher Madel (BDM), or League of German Girls, was formed in 1930. BDM, the only female youth organization of the Nazi party, and a branch of the Hitler Youth, was formed as a way to indoctrinate young girls on Nazi ideology. The main focus of the BDM was to teach girls to be dutiful housewives and mothers. To enter the group, a girl had to have two German parents, had to be willing to conform to Nazi principles, and had to be in ideal health. In 1934, Trude Mohr was appointed head of the BDM by Baldur Von Schirach, the leader of the Hitler Youth. Mohr was replaced after she married in

⁵³ Scholtz-Klink Speech "To Be German Is To Be Strong."

1937, with devout Nazi Jutta Rudiger named as her successor. Entrance into the BDM was for girls aged ten to twenty-one. The induction ceremony of ten year old girls took place every year on Hitler's birthday, April 20, with the aim of making inductees feel closer to their Führer. During their eleven-year training, girls went through various programs: for instance, at twelve, they underwent an athletic training program that would continue through the girl's time with the BDM.⁵⁴

In a late 1930s radio speech, Jutta Rudiger outlined the true purpose of the BDM and its procedures. The aim of Rudiger's speech was to combat views abroad that the BDM was solely meant to create and train girls for military action. She argued the aim of the BDM was not to train young women to be soldiers but rather to teach them to become comrades. She stated,

“Boys are trained to be political soldiers,
girls to be strong and brave women who will be the
comrades of these political soldiers, and who will later,
as wives and mothers, live out and form our National Socialist
worldview in their families. They will then raise a new
and proud generation.”⁵⁵

Essentially these young women were brought up to be servants of the Fatherland, in any capacity they may be needed. Women were needed in complimentary roles to men as supportive wives and mothers, doing whatever was needed for their country. While the BDM adamantly refused that they were training these young women to be soldiers, girls in the BDM were given rifle training. This training was considered to be character forming and was not intended to be used for defensive or offensive measures.

⁵⁴ Jutta Rüdiger, “Die Aufgaben des BDM. im Arbeitsjahr 1938,” *Das Deutsche Mädel*, January 1938, 1-3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Through the BDM, young girls were taught Nazi ideology, and motherly politics was heavily enforced. At a young age, German girls were indoctrinated with ideas of subservience to the Volk through songs they were taught at school, such as, “To Freedom Only Have We Pledged Our Lives,” and “From the Me to the We.” An example of a line from one such song is “the me is part of the great We, becomes the great machine’s subservient wheel.”⁵⁶ Many young women would long to be a part of this organization. Some girls even joined without their parent’s knowledge or consent. The girls sought out acceptance into the BDM for many reasons, some longed for a safe refuge, a sense of community, and friendship. The propaganda aimed at these girls included both a summons proclaiming, “Girls! The Führer needs you!” and, of course, the awarding of the Mother’s Cross as a military-style decoration. Many of these young girls denounced their non-Nazi parents because of the empowerment they felt through being a part of a Hitler Youth Organization. Arguably, one aim of the BDM was to remove children from parental influence. The BDM would hold events on Sundays to weaken religious devotion. Furthermore, the BDM held many time-consuming activities to keep girls out of the home. Of course, at twenty-one many of these girls would be welcomed into the larger Nazi female organization, the Nationalsozialistische Frauenschaft (NS-Frauenschaft), or National Socialist Women’s League.⁵⁷

The NS-Frauenschaft enforced all aspects of German women’s lives; from the use of German made products only to schools and classes for brides and schoolgirls. The NSF would become the Nazi’s main source of propaganda geared towards women. The

⁵⁶ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, Family Life, and Nazi Ideology, 1919-1945* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 194.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Press and Propaganda Division of the NSF became essential for the Nazis during World War II to spread propaganda to German women; these propaganda campaigns centered mostly on a woman's role in the war. The propaganda machines would become the way the Nazis mobilized women for war.

With Gertrud Scholtz-Klink's main platform consisting of promoting male superiority and women's place in the home, as seen in her speech "To Be German is to Be Strong," Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels unsurprisingly used her as a basis for Nazi gender propaganda. This material glorified motherhood in order to enforce the ideal of community and to implement Hitler's value of women supporting the "larger world" of men.⁵⁸ Examples of such propaganda included women placed in the center of their families. Thus, in one famous image, a woman figured at the center of her family, who were dressed in a rustic rural way that invoked the Nazi ideals of family and Volk (see Figure 2.4).

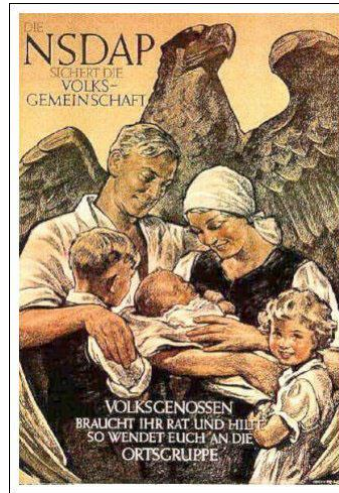
To further realize women's role in German society, through Scholtz-Klink, the Nazis began the Nazi Mother Service. The intention of this organization was to school women in politics. It was not however, designed to teach women politics but rather to shape a certain attitude in benefit of the state.⁵⁹ To further shape a woman's attitude and put into practice their strictly domestic role, Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS, instigated the Reichsbrauteschule or Bride Schools in 1936. These Bride Schools were intended to train women on how to be perfect SS wives. Propaganda for these schools

⁵⁸ Hitler, Adolf. "Hitler's Speech to the National Socialist Women's League." Speech, September 08, 1934.

⁵⁹John Simkin, "Women in Nazi Germany," Last modified November 2015 (Accessed on July 27, 2017. <http://spartacus-educational.com/GERwomen.htm>)

was issued through the NSDAP's weekly publication, the NS-Frauenswarte newsletter. Bride Schools would become German women's first taste of belonging to the SS.⁶⁰

Figure 2.4 (c. 1934)⁶¹



At first glance, women's opportunities in the SS and outside of the home as championed by Scholtz-Klink and her organization might seem a contradiction to everything that the Nazis stood for. After all Hitler was very clear on the essentially domestic role of women. They were to be mothers, to bring up "good Nazi children," who would serve the Führer. This was instilled in women from a young age through youth programs, they were to marry young and bring up children. However, the service ideal was alternately more important, particularly at the onset of World War II, when there was a shortage of skill in Germany. In 1938 a law was passed requiring women to perform a "Duty Year." This duty was to be of a patriotic form, something that would serve to aid in the Nazi cause. This would be the law that made it possible for women to become concentration camp guards.

⁶⁰ <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fw8-22c.htm>

⁶¹ John Simkin, "Women in Nazi Germany," Last modified November 2015 (Accessed on July 27, 2017. <http://spartacus-educational.com/GERwomen.htm>)

Chapter Three: Hitler's Nazi Women

As a result of Hitler's preparations for war, in combination with his staunch policies against women in the workforce, Germany found itself with a shortage of workers as the 1930s drew toward its close. In 1938, one of Hitler's most prominent lieutenants, Hermann Goering, announced that all women who had completed their schooling and were under the age of twenty-five, would begin a mandatory "Duty Year," or *Pflichtjahr*. As noted above, this new policy required women to perform domestic or agricultural service for one full year. Oftentimes these women were sent to farms with large families to tend to gardens and help with the children.⁶² The idea behind this "Duty Year," was that women would gain a sense of duty to the Fatherland. By serving their country in any way that was needed, they were serving Germany and thereby their Führer, Hitler. Girls as young as sixteen years old were sent away from their families for a year to essentially be servants.

The *Pflichtjahr* did not mean that Hitler had changed his views on women, a fact that can be seen by the largely domestic nature of work they were assigned. However, after the invasion of Poland in 1939, and the start of World War II, the Nazis needed all able hands. Germany's Labor Service became compulsory for women in 1939. Through the Labor Service women were still expected to serve a year as under the Duty Year program, only now more options became available. Women could be assigned to farms and domestic service, again as before, but after 1939 they could also be assigned to work in ammunition factories. After 1940, women were also called for an additional six months of war auxiliary service which could include clerical work, munitions work,

⁶² Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013).

nursing, and social welfare.⁶³ First under the Pflichtjahr program and then as a result of wartime labor service, it became more common for women to leave their home and parents for work beginning in early 1938. And in addition to integrating them into Nazi Party hierarchies, service in the BDM now also opened a new, fateful opportunity for women – the prospect of working directly for the SS.

Most German women pursued careers at this time entered the workforce through nursing with the Red Cross or the previously unheard-of opportunity of service as a secretary for the SS. Women could also pursue careers as teachers. This new generation of young German women often saw these opportunities as just that – opportunities, which they pursued by leaving home at a younger age than in the past. Yet, while these opportunities would likely have been recognized as such by the Weimar generation of women, what this new generation sought was not female emancipation, but a fulfillment to be had through the “Jewish Question” – that is, through assertion of their racial superiority. This is not surprising considering the education most of these women would have had through the BDM and Hitler Youth as well as education in German schools that were centered on Nazi ideology. For the career minded, opportunistic German woman, the best chance for advancement was through service in the East.

The East had long been envisioned by Hitler and Himmler as Germany’s Manifest Destiny. Hitler saw the East as fertile territory perfect to breed a pure Aryan nation. While historians can find no concrete proof that Hitler was himself particularly preoccupied with the American Wild West, Nazi leaders are on record making statements to justify expanding territories based on American expansion and brutality toward Native

⁶³ Ibid.

Americans.⁶⁴ The party even issued propaganda that invoked images of the Wild West, depicting Germans in wagon trails and SS men on motorcycles like cowboys *sans* horse. A board game, too, became quite popular among German families that depicted Germans as the pioneers of the East.⁶⁵ The East was Germany's frontier and the Nazis sought all means to romanticize it to gain support. It worked.

German men and women alike flocked to training that would carry them east. For most women, this meant work as nurses, typist, SS wives, and camp guards through their civilian SS service. After their training, new teachers were given orders of where they would be based. Many were sent to Poland to educate the supposedly "inferior" races. These teachers were instructed on proper indoctrination of children and advised to notify the SS if they considered a child to be disabled. These children with "disabilities" were sent for a screening process wherein it would be determined if they were racially inferior, meaning they would not be able to produce a viable Aryan. One school boy interviewed in 2011 recalled a young epileptic girl who was sent away. When the children questioned the teacher about what happened to the girl she only said the girl was a disruption to class that was no longer needed. The girl was never seen again.⁶⁶

For the most loyal Nazi supporters, secretary positions in Berlin and Vienna, particularly working in Himmler's headquarters, was the ideal. To obtain this post, candidates had to pass an examination focused on their genealogy, physical appearance, and personal character. A position in SS headquarters was so coveted because it was the

⁶⁴ Carroll B. Kakel III, *The American West and the Nazi East: A Comparative and Interpretive Perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁶⁵ Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2014).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

best chance at voluntarily going East. For those secretaries that sought out work in the Reich Security main office or for the Gestapo, were forced to take a vow of secrecy. Once a secretary gained either the Reich Security's office or Gestapo's trust, they could be moved East or might otherwise continue at their current location.⁶⁷ Trustworthiness was so important in these positions because secretaries were often accomplices or witnesses to crimes committed by the Reich. Both positions were, however, highly sought after.

In her memoirs, Hitler's last secretary, Gertraud 'Traudl' Junge, admits feelings of guilt about her culpability of the Nazi regime in the 1960s. This among other factors has affected the view of Nazi women as mere victims of the Third Reich. Junge was Hitler's secretary for the two and a half years before his death and would be the one to type his suicide note in the bunker. Traudl came up in the BDM and later was a part of its satellite organization, the 'Faith and Beauty' organization, where she hoped to realize her dreams of becoming a dancer. It is these dreams that drove her to go to Berlin, where she became not a dancer, but at the age of twenty-two, in the 'Wolf's Lair,' one of Hitler's last secretaries. Traudl described her position with Hitler in her memoirs, saying that she took dictation mostly, often time of speeches and of top secret orders for motor vehicles and pilots. She spoke of her boss as being "a very friendly, agreeable host to his female guests."⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Michael Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation: The Nazi Leadership of the Reich Security Main Office* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 116-119.

⁶⁸ Traudl Junge, ed. Melissa Muller, *Hitler's Last Secretary: A Firsthand Account of Life with Hitler* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2002).

Figure 3.1 Junge on her wedding day.⁶⁹



Junge was among the first to hear the Führer speak of his loss of hope at victory. She also heard Hitler dismiss his officers from the bunker saying, “Gentlemen, it’s over. I shall stay here in Berlin and shoot myself when the moment comes. Anyone who wants to go can go now. Everyone is free to do so.” In her memoirs, Traudl remembered the moment Hitler’s summons her for dictation. She soon realized this is to be his suicide note containing his will, legacy information, and his intentions to marry Eva before they are united in death. Traudl recalled being surprised by this because through it all she still held faith in her Führer that he would come through triumphant and Germany would be saved. At the very least she expected an admission of guilt or justification of the actions committed. But none came, and she recalled the moment she heard the gunshot and knew her Führer was now dead.⁷⁰

If secretaries such as Junge could perhaps be blamed for no more than being accomplices in the Third Reich’s terror program, the same did not hold true for the wives of SS men. A highly propagandized and sought-after path for German women was that of being wife to an SS man. As previously mentioned, Himmler’s bride schools instructed young women on how to be proper SS wives and mothers to racially pure Germans.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Some 240,000 German women were accepted as racially viable wives to SS soldiers. These women often became as vicious as their husband in the eradication of Jews and those who were viewed as racially inferior. Women were instructed in the bride schools to be subordinate to their husbands, through Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler's "Engagement and Marriage Decree," formally established the couple as racial equals. In this decree Himmler stated, "the future of our Volk rests upon the preservation of the race through selection and the healthy inheritance of good blood."⁷¹ That is, while a woman was to be subservient, Nazi doctrine stressed even more that a couple was expected to act together in the fight for the racial purity of the Volk. Toward this end, a "Law for Encouragement of Marriage" granted German couples certain benefits, such as a loan of 1,000 marks with the amount they were required to pay back decreased by twenty-five percent for each child the couple had, and also conceded them raised social status.⁷²

One of the more infamous SS brides was Ilse Koch. Ilse married Karl-Otto Koch in 1937, soon after he was transferred to Buchenwald concentration camp just outside of Weimar, as commandant. Ilse, her husband, and their children had a home on the camp grounds outside of the prison walls. Inmates allege that to please Ilse, an indoor riding ring was constructed by prisoners so she could enjoy one of her favorite leisure activities, horse riding. Here, at Buchenwald, Ilse would gain the nickname from prisoners "the Bitch of Buchenwald," for her many abuses to prisoners.

⁷¹ SS Marriage Order (December 31, 1931). In United States Chief Counsel for the Prosecution of Axis Criminality, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, Volume IV. (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1946), Document 2284-PS.

⁷² Larry V. Thompson, "Lebensborn and the Eugenics Policy of the Reichsführer-SS." (*Central European History* 4, no. 1, 1971), 54–77.

Figure 3.2 Ilse Koch and her husband at Buchenwald.⁷³



It was alleged during her trials that one of her chief abuses was to select prisoners with tattoos she thought interesting and have them skinned. Of these skins, it was alleged that Koch would have trinkets, handbags, and lampshades made. It is thought that this may have been part of a larger medical experimentation that Buchenwald was being used for. Furthermore, Ilse was alleged at carrying around a riding crop to beat prisoners as well as forcing them into hard physical labor. In further testimony it was also alleged that both Ilse and Karl partook in sadistic acts toward prisoners. In addition to the above allegations, Ilse and her husband were also accused of corruption by the SS prior to liberation. Ilse would talk herself out of this, but Karl was arrested for his crimes. After his arrest, Ilse remained at Buchenwald until its liberation in 1945.⁷⁴

Of the positions available to women during the Third Reich, none were quite as complicit in the Holocaust as nurses. It is not surprising that through nursing, the largest number of women were brought into the Nazi killing field given that in times of war medical assistance would be highly needed. However, for the Nazi women who served as

⁷³ Paul Roland, *Nazi Women: The Attraction of Evil* (London: Arcturus Publishing, 2017).

⁷⁴ Alexandra Przyrembel, "Transfixed by an Image: Ilse Koch, the 'Kommandeuse of Buchenwald'," *German History* 19, no. 3 (October, 2001): 369-99.

nurses, they were not only needed for the medical treatment of soldiers but for the ‘racial hygiene’ of German and for diagnosing hereditary diseases. With global war on the horizon, the call for nurses became greater – experienced, trusted nurses were consequently sent to recruit from organizations such as the Hitler Youth. Young women were lured by images of propaganda of happy nurses stationed in exotic locations, presenting war as not a violent environment but as a place to care for and nurture men. Many of these young women did not need propaganda to convince them, as they saw nursing as a means to escape village life and claim the glamorous lifestyle of the East for themselves.

Regardless of why they joined, during their training young women who were to become nurses were heavily indoctrinated into Nazi ideology. They were taught that Germans were superior to all other races and were required to take an oath to the Führer. When later interviewed, one German Red Cross nurse was recalled that they had been instructed that the Russian people were evil and “butchered and devoured children.” When this woman later mentioned that the Bolshevik Communists were seen as evil as well, it appeared that she had in fact wanted to say this of the Jews but had thought better of it. As historian Wendy Lower concluded, these young women believed what they were told and actively lived it.⁷⁵ The simple fact remains that while all occupations within the Third Reich could potentially lead to becoming active in the killing fields, nurses had the greatest opportunity.

⁷⁵ Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (New York: Mariner Books, 2013).

The case of Pauline Kneissler highlights this. Kneissler was one of the first women to actively implement the Nazis' T-4 experimentation and euthanasia program yet had not officially joined the Nazi party until 1937, at thirty-seven years old. Prior to her official enlistment, she attended the Nazi Evangelical Church and was active in the National Socialist Women's League. Because of this, she was familiar with Nazi ideology on racial superiority and had come to believe that the "law of nature," as the Nazis saw it, conflicted with religion – with her loyalties ultimately going to the former rather than the latter.⁷⁶ In 1939, Kneissler and twenty other nurses were summoned to the Ministry of the Interior for instruction on the Führer's euthanasia law. Kneissler explained later in her testimony that they had been informed that their involvement would be voluntary, top secret, and if they participated, their obedience would be required. Without protest, they were all sworn in and further cautioned that any breach of their silence would be punishable by death.⁷⁷

Kneissler was sent to the NS-Tötungsanstalt Grafeneck, or the Grafeneck Euthanasia Centre, located in the Grafeneck Castle in Gomadingen, Germany. Here Kneissler was instructed to make the rounds at nearby institutions to transfer patients to Grafeneck. The patients, who were deemed either physically or mentally disabled, were examined by doctors who decided whether they were to be killed or not. Roughly seventy patients entered Grafeneck per day; most were killed within twenty-four hours of arrival. The euthanasia process at Grafeneck was to administer morphine, gas them, dissect the

⁷⁶ Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 205.

⁷⁷ Pauline Kneissler Testimony, National Records and Archives Administration (NARA), RG 238, NMT, NO-470.

bodies, then cremate them. The ashes were then mixed together and sent to the patient's family in an urn with a fabricated form letter. To protect those involved in this top-secret project, the doctors' names and the causes of death were both falsified. Indoctrinated as she was, Kneissler saw no issue with this process, nor did her fellow nurses, who claimed it was not that bad because the gas was painless. However, this needless murdering need not to have happened because by her own admission, most patients were in "good physical condition," and "not all particularly serious cases."⁷⁸ In 1940 alone, Grafeneck murdered 9,839 disabled patients. Kneissler was active in the Nazi killing field for five years, including a short stint in the East during which she aided in transporting her programs killing protocols to the regime's concentration camps.⁷⁹

Not all German women who sought to pursue careers in nursing were allowed to do so by the State's Labor Exchange program, however. Irma Grese attempted to secure a position as a nurse twice and was denied each time; her second attempt resulted in her enlistment at Ravensbrück concentration camp. Ravensbrück, after the closure of another facility at Lichtenburg in 1939, became the only camp mainly for women, as well as the largest. Ravensbrück was not initially a death camp, as others such as Auschwitz were, but this did not diminish the horrors inflicted on prisoners there, nor did it limit the number of deaths that took place at the hand of guards. Construction of the camp began in 1938 by male prisoners of Sachsenhausen concentration camp and was opened in 1939 at Ravensbrück, Germany, some fifty miles outside of Berlin. Nine hundred women were transferred to Ravensbrück from their internment at Lichtenburg upon its opening in

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (New York: Mariner Books, 2013).

May. The internees at the camp came from thirty different countries and included women convicted for being work-shy (that is, deemed as unfit to work based on German standards), Jews, political outcasts, Jehovah Witnesses, asocial (many afflicted with schizophrenia), and women guilty of having had inter-racial relationships.⁸⁰

Upon its liberation in 1945, Ravensbrück itself housed over 50,000 prisoners, the majority women. As with other camps, the sanitary conditions of Ravensbrück were deplorable and the barracks extremely overcrowded. Rations were small and the quality lacking. The women of Ravensbrück were forced into physical labor, generally agriculturally. Beginning in 1942, commanders of the camp began medical testing on women that included forced sterilization, to include children, and wound care using a variety of different chemicals, most women did not survive and those that did were left with irreparable physical and mental damage. Also, in 1942, the SS began opening brothels across Germany with most of its workers comprised from prisoners of Ravensbrück. As the largest female camp, Ravensbrück moreover had over forty subcamps by 1944, with over 70,000 inmates, again mostly women. It was not until just months before the end of the war that Ravensbrück was turned into a death camp. Prior to this, but after 1942, prisoners deemed unfit to work in the Nazi's forced labor institution or those who were sick were sent to Auschwitz for execution. Before 1942 these prisoners were simply shot by guards of Ravensbrück.⁸¹

Except for the SS officers serving as camp commandants, all of the guards of Ravensbrück concentration camp were female. These women were not directly employed

⁸⁰ Sarah Helm, *Ravensbrück: Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 2016).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

by the SS but were instead female civilian employees of the SS, or *Weiblichen SS-Gefolges*. Because these female employees were so effective at Ravensbrück, the camp quickly became a training camp for female guards. One such guard was a German woman who would later become known by many names, “The Hyena of Auschwitz,” “The Bitch of Belsen,” and “The Beautiful Beast of Ravensbrück”: Irma Grese.

Grese was the daughter of a dairy worker and her mother committed suicide when she was a child; the exact reason for this is not known but it is thought to have been due to marital strife. With her blonde hair and blue eyes, Grese was the epitome of Hitler’s vision for his Aryan race. She had a fanatical obsession with the League of German Girls, not surprising given the fact that after the Enabling Act of 1933, all school-age Germans were educated under the Nazi ideological system. In Grese’s case, what is surprising is that her father was staunchly against Nazism, a difference of opinion that scholars have in the main faulted for Grese’s departure from her family home and entry into the Nazi bureaucracy at an especially tender age.⁸²



Figure 3.3 Irma Grese after her arrest.⁸³

⁸² The United Nations War Crimes Commission. *Law Reports of Trials of War Criminals: Volume II The Belsen Trial*. London, 1947.

⁸³ Paul Roland, *Nazi Women: The Attraction of Evil* (London: Arturus Publishing, 2017).

Grese dreamt of becoming a nurse but did not score well in the requisite exams, and in 1942, at the age of eighteen, was placed at Ravensbrück to begin her training as a camp guard. According to Grese's testimony, she protested this, but records showed her placement to have been voluntary. As part of her training, Grese was taught to be violent and sadistic towards internees. And once an active SS-Aufseherin, she quickly excelled at this duty, earning placement at Auschwitz in 1943 until her transfer to the Bergen-Belsen Camp two years later.⁸⁴ Grese's time at each camp was later described by prisoners as sadistic and brutal. She could be seen walking around daily with a riding whip that she described as made of, "cellophane paper plaited like a pigtail...[and] translucent like white glass." Grese's riding crop became well-known to prisoners, who she frequently beat with it, and which she supplemented with a walking stick she put to similar use, as well as starved dogs that attacked inmates on her command. Once she became a guard at Auschwitz, Grese also carried a pistol, making her one of a select few Aufseherinnen allowed to be so armed. Yet, although permitted to carry a gun, Grese by all accounts preferred to use her favorite riding crop on prisoners, often severely beating women and most especially across their breasts. By her own admission, given during her postwar trial, Grese had in fact been ordered by superiors to cease carrying and using her whip, which she had defied. During testimony, she further explained that the beatings she and others gave out had officially only been termed severe when they could likely result in a victim's subsequent death.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/trials/grese.html>

⁸⁵ The United Nations War Crimes Commission. *Law Reports of Trials of War Criminals: Volume II The Belsen Trial*. London, 1947.

To the women guards of Buchenwald, perhaps the most infamous camp of the Holocaust, Auschwitz was seen as a promotion, the camp at which women who excelled at their SS work were placed, usually in the Birkenau section of the camp. It was precisely here that Grese eventually came to assist the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele in selecting inmates to be sent to the gas chambers. At the proceedings against Irma Grese, which formed part of the larger Bergen-Belsen war crimes trial, testimony from Ilona Stein, a prisoner at both Birkenau and Belsen, established that during the selection parade of August 1944, there were two-three thousand prisoners selected, of which Grese and Mengele were responsible for sending to the gas chamber. And this was during just one such selection.

The case made against Grese, as with other female guards, was broad and Stein's deposition added weight to the accusations against her. Stein herself was beaten by Grese on just one occasion, but she had witnessed many such beatings. For example, when speaking of the selection parades she testified that, "People chosen would sometimes sneak away from the line and hide themselves under their beds. Grese would go and find them, beat them until they collapsed and then drag them back into line again."⁸⁶ On another occasion, which underlines the power that Grese wielded in the camp, Stein stated that she witnessed a woman escape from the selection line, go to another to join her daughter, and Grese noticed this. Grese immediately called this to attention of a male SS guard and ordered him to shoot the women, which he did. Male SS officers were not generally well-disposed to taking orders from *Aufseherinnen*, but the authority Grese commanded garnered her special respect. Grese also confessed to having ordered other

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Aufseherinnen to often severely beat prisoners, though technically she had no authority to do so.⁸⁷

Grese remained at Auschwitz until January of 1945, when she was transferred back to Ravensbrück for a short time until she was again transferred that March to Bergen-Belsen, where she remained until its liberation in April of that same year. Grese was not an anomaly; she was one of hundreds of sadistic female guards based at the infamous death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau.⁸⁸ However, out of them a mere sixteen were sentenced to death. The physical and mental damage done to victims of the Third Reich is hard for most to fathom, giving a basis for why the Holocaust is such a highly studied topic.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Southern, Cynthia. "Irma Grese the Blond Beast of Birkenau and Belsen." Warfare History. <http://warfarehistorynetwork.com/daily/wwii/irma-grese-the-blonde-beast-of-birkenau-and-belsen/> (Accessed August 2017).

Conclusion

As mentioned above, only sixteen Aufseherinnen were sentenced to death. Irma Grese was among them, making her the youngest woman to be executed under British law during the twentieth century, at just twenty-two years old. The trials of all of the women convicted for war crimes, whether committed as nurses, secretaries, wives, or guards, were all carried out in international court. This similarity aside, Kneissler, Koch, and Junge fared much better than Grese. Junge escape with little prison time, which consisted mostly of interrogations by Soviets and Americans, but after early 1946, she was free to live her life. She would go on to write in her memoirs of the guilt she had come to feel for her part of the Nazi atrocities, though she paradoxically also stated that she saw nothing wrong with her own actions or those of any other Germans at the time.⁸⁹

Pauline Kneissler was tried under the medical cases trial and convicted and sentenced to four years; she was released after serving only a year. During the trials, Kneissler held firm that she was never cruel to anyone and maintained that the victims died mercifully because death by gas or injection was painless. She is rumored to have killed Germans who were wounded, disabled, and mentally ill as well. This last question is still a taboo subject in Germany and consequently awaits further historical inquiry, though given the nature of the T-4 program, such actions would hardly seem uncharacteristic.⁹⁰

Ilse Koch's story, finally, is slightly different from the rest. She was tried during the Buchenwald cases of the Dachau Trials, in which she was the only woman defendant.

⁸⁹ Traudl Junge, ed. Melissa Muller, *Hitler's Last Secretary: A Firsthand Account of Life with Hitler* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2002).

⁹⁰ Nuremberg Trials: Medical Cases

Koch was sentenced to life in prison.⁹¹ Of this sentence, she served only two years before being pardoned by the military governor in Germany, General Lucius D. Clay. Clay's decision, however, met with major backlash, and in 1949 she was re-arrested and again sentenced to life in prison, this time convicted of the murder of 135 people. This conviction stuck, and Koch remained in prison until 1967, when she took her own life.⁹²

Limited prison time or still less punishment was typical for women involved in the Final Solution. There is no conclusive, explicit reason for this; one can only suppose it stemmed from a widespread perception that women under the Third Reich had numbered among the victims and not the perpetrators of Nazi abuses. Many Nazi survivors today still leverage this perception of victimhood to justify their anti-Semitic views, a position often on display in interviews of German women performed by scholar Alison Owings.⁹³ And while some relatively inactive Nazi women may well have suffered from Nazi policies more than they were complicit in them, this simply did not hold true for the more vicious perpetrators of the Final Solution.

And where did this viciousness and complicity stem from? Through a series of social clashes dating back to the Weimar period, a manner of feminine consciousness formed. Obtaining the right to vote under the Weimar Constitution led to the eventual political support women gave to National Socialism. Through Weimar's "New Woman," gender roles began to shift. Women became more assertive, open to new opportunities

⁹¹ The United Nations War Crimes Commission. *Law Reports of Trials of War Criminals: Volume XI The Dachau Trials*. London, 1949.

⁹² Alexandra Przyrembel, "Transfixed by an Image: Ilse Koch, the 'Kommandeuse of Buchenwald'." (*German History* 19, no. 3: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 369-99.

⁹³ Alison Owings, *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

outside of the traditional motherly roles in the domestic sphere, as well as more open sexually. These changes in the marginalization of women helped to shape a female consciousness that later led a new generation of German women to become involved in Nazism by creating a history of women active in politics as well as more generally outside of the home. This newly-formed “New Woman” and what she stood for under Weimar would come to an end under Hitler, but, the effect of Weimar-era victories on women’s suffrage, and the subsequent increased ability women felt to share their political opinions and participate publicly should not be dismissed, as it contributed to their support of the Nazi regime in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

At this time, economic turmoil led women to believe that only National Socialism held the answer to Germany’s ills. Unemployment, a vast depreciation of the German Mark, and widespread food shortages, created an atmosphere of national desperation in which Hitler thrived, billing himself as the man who could pull Germany from her depression. While some German women had flourished under the expanded gender roles of the Weimar era, many more felt a pressing need to find a solution to Germany’s socio-economic troubles. Food was still needed, money was still needed and there was very little of both. These desperate conditions drove women to an otherwise unlikely support for National Socialism – a support that would soon become quite natural for many German women, who after their takeover of power an ascendant Nazi regime would indoctrinate from a young age.

This indoctrination firmly entrenched the Nazi worldview in countless German women’s minds. In the BDM and the SS Bride Schools, German girls were instructed from youth on what a pure German society ought to look like. Through the Lebensborn

homes, young women were encouraged to produce pure Aryan children with SS men. In combination, these and other such measures shaped yet another, new female consciousness, based around racial superiority. And, after the implementation of the Duty Year and through the Labor Service, women were encouraged to step away from home to serve Germany in any way they were needed. As a result of this service and the extensive amounts of indoctrination these women had already received, they finally became actively involved in the Nazi killing fields in positions such as nurses, secretaries, SS wives, and concentration camp guards. The acts committed by these women during WWII cannot be over exaggerated nor can their willingness to become fully engaged in the malevolence of the Final Solution be ignored.

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