
Women in the Third Reich

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As a result of the second wave of the women’s movement, it is now generally accepted that women are in the best position not only to study the social situation of contemporary women, but also to explain women’s roles in the more distant past. Indeed, the writing of history always contributes to the defense or criticism of the dominant order. In this way, historians’ neglect has further enforced in the minds of their descendants the marginal existence of women in past centuries.

Girls who attended school after World War II certainly never heard of Lilo Herrmann in their history classes. Herrmann was a young woman and mother who, on June 20, 1938, was one of the first killed because of her brave and steadfast resistance to fascism. Nor did they hear of Hanne Martens, an actress and antifascist, whose skull was crushed by an SS man when she refused to be hanged naked. Nor of Martha Gillesen, who was shot in the head by SS officers, after she, with the rest of her resistance group, was tied up with barbed wire and given an injection in the tongue, so that she could not scream. Nor of Kaete Larsch, tortured to death, when she would not betray others in the resistance. Nor of the resistance fighter Johanna Kirschner, who was sentenced in half an hour and condemned to death in June of 1944.

We could list thousands of women’s names: those who resisted and were sentenced and condemned in the so-called people’s court; or who were gassed, shot, abused to death, experimented on or

starved to death in concentration camps, or who died doing hard labor. Only the memories of the abuse and other horrors people endured and a thorough mourning for the terrible suffering of so many innocent people will protect later generations from similar experiences.

What did Nazi ideology have to say about women? Reading national socialist writings, what stands out most clearly is an unbelievable contempt for women. In 1921, just two years after women got the vote, the Nazi party voted unanimously in their first general meeting that “a woman can not be accepted to the party leadership!” In fact, a woman was never nominated by the NSDAP to serve in local or provincial parliaments, or in the Reichstag. Joseph Goebbels, the State Minister for People’s Enlightenment and Propaganda, explained the political disenfranchisement of women in the following way during his speech at the opening of the exhibit “Woman” in Berlin:

The National Socialist movement is the only party that keeps women out of direct involvement in daily politics... We have not kept her out of parliamentary-democratic intrigues because of any disrespect toward women. It is not because we see in her and her mission something less worthy, but rather that we see in her and her mission something quite different from the vocation which men have... Her first and foremost, and most appropriate place is in the family, and the most wonderful duty which she can take on is to give her country and her people children, children which carry on the success of the race and assure the immortality of the nation.

Another Nazi leader, party member number two and president of the Reich’s Tourist Bureau Hermann Esser, instructed women in the following way: “Women belong at home in the kitchen and the bedroom, they belong at home and should be raising their children.”

And Adolf Hitler, who was Fuehrer of the German nation for twelve years, announced:

What a man contributes in hero’s courage on the battlefield, a woman contributes in her eternally patient sacrifice, in her eternally patient suffering. Every child that she brings into the world is a battle which she undergoes for the existence of her people.

So it is not surprising that women who had no children were seen as “duds in population politics.” Families with fewer than four children had not fulfilled their “duty to the people’s preservation rate,” and woman who had many children received a “mother’s cross.”

These are the symptoms of the boundlessly controlling behavior of the Nazis toward women. Why wasn’t National Socialism widely rejected by women? The German women’s movement had been active for twenty years; by that time there was a tradition of collective struggle for women’s rights. Since many women had lost fathers, sons, or brothers and were alone, they were forced to live very difficult, independent lives.

Of course, women were not a homogenous group that acted and thought alike. Taking a close look at the many different ways in which women acted during the Third Reich, I generally differentiate four groups. First, there were women who sooner or later resisted the

Nazis and their terrible deeds. Many had to pay with their lives. They are, however, unknown—the heroines of history.

Then there were their adversaries: women who allowed themselves to be the tools of other people's torture and who for their part abused and beat people, and killed them in terrible ways. These women were most often dumb, young, arrogant and lured by the relatively good standard of living provided by the party. Since they often came from broken, authoritarian families, they often misused the power that they had over defenseless victims.

Between these two groups of women, there were the ignorant and those who just went along with things. Of course these groups were also heterogeneous. In each group there were women from every social class.

Among the ignorant women I count those who were totally apolitical (they usually remained apolitical after the war; they did not learn anything). These were the women who only thought about keeping their families alive; it didn't matter what happened to their neighbors. Even today, the "complete mastery of potatoes and their characteristics" is praised in German society "the art of gourmet potato dumplings" is admired, and pages are devoted to the potato, and thus the "triumph of survival" is celebrated. When concentration camps are mentioned, it's in a pithy aside: The Americans "posted horrible pictures of concentration camps on the walls." Even today, such ignorance sends chills up your spine.

The "fellow travellers" included the so-called leaders of Nazi women's organizations, such as the blond-haired woman, leader of the *Reichs*-women and eleven-time mother, Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, and also the women who voted for Hitler and fit in one way or another. However, people's belief that women helped Hitler to power has no basis in fact.

In the presidential election of 1932, 51.6 percent of women voted for Hindenburg, 26.5 percent for Hitler. In the second vote, 56 percent were for Hindenburg and 33.6 percent for Hitler. In both votes the number of men's votes was about 2 percent greater than women's.

Many voted conservatively, so that the misogynist Center Party got a large percentage of women's votes, but not the Nazis.

We should not forget that women had just been granted the active and passive vote, and thus were not practiced in political matters. They were not able to recognize their own interests and to represent them politically. Even for those who had started leaving the home hearth, there hadn't been enough time to overcome their dependent intellectual, social and economic status in the family or in their professions. In the first years of Nazi rule, they were driven back to their traditional domain, the family, and thus shut out of all social activities. Next the eradication of unemployment became women's burden, as many were fired from their posts and jobs. Married women who worked were denounced as "double earners."

Only a few women recognized that being shut out of the workplace and restricted to the home, with loans available only to those families where the mother didn't work, and the awarding of privileges to families with many children would serve only one purpose: the strengthening of "national manpower", in other words, the "production of human material." In 1932, there was an average of 59 births per 1,000 women, but by 1938 it was already 81 births. The slogan was: "Give the Fuehrer children."

The so-called "Fountain of Life" (*Lebensborn*), an organization founded in 1935 by the national leader of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, was concerned with this "strengthened propagation." There, "racially worthy" girls were at the service of SS men for the procreation of Aryan children; here antifeminism and racism were bound up in the most intricate way. The administrator of these breeding institutions said, in all openness, that the goal was the production of human material: "Thanks to the 'Fountain of Life', we'll have 600 more regiments in thirty years."

There are reasons why so many women were blind to the dangers of the misogynist and racist ideology of the Nazis. For one thing, National Socialism was not so different from the attitude, opinion and posture of the conservatives,

the German nationalists and the populists of the Weimar Republic, who were also often misogynist. For hundreds of years, the German people had been accustomed to state elitism and authoritarian behavior. This is also one of the reasons why there was no violent wave of protest from women collectively when the countless women's unions were dissolved, or forced to dissolve themselves, or when the decision that only 10% of students at the university could be female was announced, or when women were forbidden to take up influential positions, such as that of judge or administrator.

In western history, the struggle for women's equality and recognition is very young. At that moment when the women's movement could have developed on a broader level, it was destroyed. The refined strategy of strengthening and praising women in their traditionally dictated roles of caring housewife and mother had a very strong effect on the unenlightened. Never before had women been so directly addressed; never before had their reproductive function received so much recognition. Surely we should try to understand what drove the "fellow travellers" and the ignorant women to accept the degrading roles assigned to them by men.

What came out of the ignorance and willing sacrifice of these women is only a part of our history. The other part is often hidden from us.

Immediately after the war, numerous books were published by women who told how the war affected them, of their terrible suffering, but also of their bravery and the courage of antifascist women. The books quickly sold and only a few of them got a second printing. Yet these books relate the horrifying details, without which our knowledge of the murder of millions of people would be very superficial. Nanda Herbermann, for example, describes in her book *The Blessed Abyss* (which has been out of print for years) what she experienced in an imprisonment that came about for no obvious reason:

In complete darkness, I felt a stool which had been screwed into the floor. I heard the groaning and

whimpering of the poor souls who were next to me, above and below, languishing in cell after cell in solitary confinement. Some of them had lost their sanity. No wonder! They raged and beat on the doors of their cells, sang crazy songs all through the night. Still others sang distorted old church songs in desperate voices, like animals, until one of the wardens came and beat them terribly—they even sometimes locked dogs in the cells, so that the trained animals could attack the victims. Among those detained were some out of whom dogs had bitten huge pieces of flesh; some had lost half an ear, others a piece of their nose, or their hand or whatever. Still others in the cell block were found covered with blood hard as ice. In this

house of death, it was always bitterly cold. There I sat, barefoot in the darkness, freezing in my deepest soul.

The horror that we read in these lines should not make us turn away helplessly. Rather, the knowledge of the suppressed crimes and the unspeakable suffering should give us the conviction, the anger and courage we need in the fight against Naziism, which even now survives in our democracy and threatens us. The danger of being mere objects of political processes still exists. The scorn and mockery of pacifism, for example, has a tradition. (“To be a pacifist shows a lack of character and disposition,” said Adolf Hitler in 1923.)

In a world where they make the stationing of neutron bombs appealing by saying, “they reduce the chances that

these or any other weapons will ever be used;” in a world where we speak of the “balance of terror” and the “spiral of atomic retribution,” women resistance fighters can be role models. With clear consciences, the women resistance fighters of the Third Reich set themselves against an ideology that did not value human life; they fought bravely and confidently for the old revolutionary goals: equality, justice and above all, humanity. For this they were tortured and for the most part murdered. But our memories of them and their courageous deeds can help us to prevent similar events—in whatever form they take—from ever being repeated in the future.

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