WOMEN AND THE NAZI STATE

Hitler may have thought that women were there for cooking, children and church, but recent research has shown that female attitudes to, and involvement in, the apparatus of the Third Reich was much more significant, argues Matthew Stibbe.

Role models: women receiving 'German Mother Iron Cross' decorations in Berlin, October 1939.

Since the 1960s gender-based research in a wide variety of areas has increasingly rectified distortions produced by a process of historical enquiry based exclusively on men and records kept by men. At first sight, however, the Third Reich would appear to be an area in which the importance of women as actors in history could not easily be demonstrated. After all, Nazism was the most reactionary and repressive of all modern ideologies, and one which from the outset totally excluded women from holding any leading positions of power and responsibility. Indeed, much early work on National Socialism, reflecting a traditional male bias, tended either to ignore the importance of gender or else reinforce a stereotype of women as the passive and innocent victims of a male-dominated movement. Nevertheless, as historians are increasingly coming to recognise, the success of Nazism depended not on one single all-embracing factor but on its ability to enforce a dynamic integration of a variety of conflicting interests, not least those of women, who at the time constituted over half of the German population. For example, although the male vote for the Nazis during the Weimar Republic was always higher than the female, the difference did narrow in the early 1930s and in some Protestant areas was even reversed. In particular, it seems likely that many younger women who had not voted before cast their first ballot for Nazi candidates, which suggests that there was something in the party programme which positively attracted them.

It is now well established that the Nazi anti-feminism was related in significant ways to their racist ideology as a whole. Like the Jew, the modern 'emancipated' woman was seen as an agent of degeneracy and national decline, bringing in her wake the 'destructive' forces of Bolshevism, democracy and parliamentarianism. German women, it was frequently claimed, were being lured by Jews and Marxists into rational thinking and an 'unhealthy' preoccupation with sexuality, whilst the advocates of female emancipation were accused of working for no less than the complete destruction of 'Christian-Germanic' existence and family life.

The Nazis promised to restore the traditional balance between the sexes by inducing women to celebrate their 'natural' domestic roles as mothers and housewives. 'Equal rights for women', Hitler declared, 'means that they receive the esteem they deserve in the sphere nature has assigned to them'. In particular, women were to become the focus of the Nazis' drive to boost the birth rate. At least in the early years of the regime they were systematically directed away from the idea of a full-time career towards starting or extending a family, and to this end a generous system of mar-
riage loans was introduced. Similarly, in education policy the emphasis was away from developing 'unnatural' qualities, such as academic ability and independence, in favour of training for future maternal roles through compulsory courses in domestic science and biology.

Women were also discouraged from using cosmetics and wearing 'decadent' foreign modes of dress; sex appeal was considered to be 'Jewish cosmopolitanism', whilst slimming cures were frowned upon as counter to the birth drive. Attempts were made to create a new 'Germanic style' through a German Fashion Bureau, set up in 1933 under the honorary presidency of Magda Goebbels, in order to combat clothes considered decadent or slavish imitations of men's styles. There was also an increased emphasis on physical fitness: women were encouraged to achieve the Reich Sport Medal, and smoking, especially whilst pregnant, was strictly condemned.

In marriage, the principle of love was replaced by the principle of Rassengefühl or racial awareness, and couples intending to apply for the marriage loan were forced to go through a demanding medical examination, leading to a great fear of revealing hereditary defects and to a lucrative black market in documents proving Aryan ancestry. The future wives of SS men were subject to a particularly rigorous procedure, and had to attend special Bräutenschule or bride schools to prepare them for motherhood.

Those considered to be racially or socially undesirable for motherhood were denied the relative benefits afforded to 'racially desirable' women. According to one estimate, 27,958 'undesirable' women had been forcibly sterilised by the end of 1934, with 5 per cent of these cases resulting in death. Jewish women in particular were victimised, not only on account of their race, but because of their sex, which placed them on a lower scale even than Jewish men. Aryan men who had married Jewish women were encouraged to divorce them, and in such cases any offspring were often removed from the mother. And in 1939 it was announced that the strict prohibition on abortion did not apply to Jewish women.

Non-Jewish women who chose not to get married and have children, or who for reasons beyond their control were unable to do so, were subject to a different kind of harassment and discrimination. For one woman the pressure to bear children became so great that she resorted to kidnapping. Another complained in an open letter to Hitler: 'We see our daughters growing up in stupid aimlessness, living only in the vague hope of getting a husband and having children. If they do not succeed, their lives will be thwarted'. Indeed, the Nazi state showed little interest in the fate of single women beyond child-bearing age, who were often forced to seek the lowest paid and most monotonous work. Perhaps the clearest indication of this can be seen in Article 3 of the Nuremberg race laws of 1935, which banned Aryan women from serving as maids in Jewish houses except for those over forty-five, who were considered to be out of danger of violation by their Jewish employers.

These facts were well-documented by female opponents of the regime at the time that they were happening (for a good example see Katherine Thomas' Women in Nazi Germany, London, 1943) and have long been known to historians. However, the first serious attempts at a gender-based analysis of Nazism in the 1960s and 1970s produced findings which challenged the conventional view that a complete transformation of the position of German women for the worse had taken place after 1933. Jill Stephenson, for instance (Women in Nazi Society, Croom Helm, 1975) has pointed out that the Nazis' reaction policies towards women were in line with a more general European trend in the inter-war years. Measures designed to curb abortions and contraception, and a pre-occupation with reversing the declining birth rate among 'healthy' sections of the community were common to dictatorships of the right and the left, as well as to democracies. France, for instance, had even more reason than Germany to be worried by the decline in her birth rate, and it was here, in 1920, that the practice of giving awards to prolific mothers, later taken up by the Nazis, was first introduced. In 1939 the Code de la Famille increased the penalties for contraception and abortion, the latter becoming a capital offence under the wartime Vichy regime in 1942.

Similarly, campaigns to remove married women from the labour market in order to make way for unemployed males were a typical European-wide response to the world recession of the early 1930s. In Germany itself, such policies were already being pursued by Chancellor Brüning's government between 1930 and 1932, and enjoyed the support of large sections of public opinion, including conservatives, and churches and even some trade unionists and members of the women's movement, whilst in 1933 the Dollfuss regime in Austria enacted measures to remove married women from the civil service.
which were very similar to those brought in by the Nazis in the same year. Throughout the inter-war years restrictions on women's eligibility for professional positions remained in force in many European countries, including France, Belgium, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece, the Netherlands, and until 1938, Norway. In Britain, married women were largely excluded from the teaching profession until the 1944 Butler Education Act, and it was only in the mid-1950s that the principle of equal pay was introduced in the civil service.

Meanwhile, Stephenson argues, the most significant break in the regime's stance towards women came after 1936, when unemployment had been brought down to acceptable levels and the Nazis began to reverse their previous policies in line with the requirements of rearmament and an expanding economy. The increased demand for female labour, she asserts, meant that whatever the long-term ideological goals of the Nazis may have been, in the intermediate term they could only discriminate against women to a very limited extent. Indeed, she turns the conventional picture almost completely on its head: women under Nazism benefited both from a rise in the status and benefits afforded to mothers and housewives, whilst at the same time consolidating their position in employment outside the home, including the professions.

A few years earlier David Schönbaum (Hitler's Social Revolution, Class and Status in Nazi Germany 1933-1939, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967) had already noted how economic pressures helped to improve the competitive position of women in the labour market, so that the gap between men and women's wages actually decreased during the Third Reich (differentials remained nonetheless, and the average unskilled male worker, for instance, could still expect to be paid more than the average skilled female worker). The most significant area in which the Nazis were able to uphold their ideological insistence on the 'natural inferiority' of the female sex, he argues, was in their total exclusion of women from positions of political power and responsibility within the party and state apparatus. Nevertheless, Schönbaum also claims that this loss of political status was to a large extent offset by increased job opportunities and rising wage rates, as well as improved maternity benefits and services. Overall, he concludes, the pressures of the totalitarian state combined with those of an industrialising and industrial society to produce for women ... a new status of relative if unconventional equality.

Such work has helped to shed light on the reasons why some leading figures in the pre-1933 women's movements, most notably Gertrud Bäumer of the Federation of German Women's Associations, were willing to come to a rapprochement with the
regime and even to praise some of its policies, such as the introduction of Labour service for young women in 1937, as a step towards greater equality for women within their own gender-conditioned spheres of activity. The Nazi regime itself, meanwhile, was able to produce a number of its own high-profile female personalities, such as the fashion-conscious Magda Goebbels, the screen-idol turned film producer, Leni Riefenstahl, the air pilot, Hannah Reitsch, and above all the Frauenführerin, (Women’s Leader) Gertrude Scholtz-Klink, who managed to combine her leadership of the six to eight million members of the Nazi Women’s Bureau with her responsibilities as a mother of four.

On a broader level too there has been a move away from the stereotype image of women as passive victims in the Third Reich towards women as actors in their own right. This in turn has opened up new controversies surrounding the issue of female consent to Nazism. Claudia Koonz, for instance, (Mothers in the Fatherland. Women, the Family and Nazi Politics, Jonathan Cape, 1987) has revealed the existence of women who actively supported the movement during its rise to power. Such ‘Nazi feminists’, if indeed they can be described as such, typically sought to distinguish themselves from their religious, bourgeois and socialist counterparts in their outright rejection of emancipation as a hoax: equal rights for women, they argued, had merely meant ‘equal rights to be exploited’. Paula Sieber, a Nazi activist in Düsseldorf, wrote to her local paper in 1934:

The women’s movement of yesterday led thirty-six parliamentarians and hundreds of thousands of women out onto the streets of our great cities. It made one woman a high-ranking civil servant and hundreds of thousands wage-slaves of the capitalist economic order.

More conservative figures such as Guida Diehl were to praise the efforts of National Socialism in restoring women to their lost dignity as defenders of ‘German-Christian’ spiritual values and family life. Others emphasised the opportunities which Nazism seemed to offer to forge a radically new public role for women within their own separate sphere of child care, education and welfare work. Indeed, Koonz’s research reveals that those women who were actively involved in the Nazi movement during its rise to power typically expressed satisfaction in having ‘broken free’ both from the alienation of the modern rationalised world and from the rigid class divisions which had hitherto divided the women’s movement.

In particular, members of the League of Young German Maidens nurtured a strong sense of peer group solidarity in the face of parental disapproval and the snobbery of the ‘bluestockings’ in the older, more respectable women’s organisations. Another common theme was the sense of pride many of these women felt in being able to make a contribution, however small, to the process of national renewal. Nazi leaders themselves were often at pains to stress that women were nicht gleichartig sondern gleichwertig – ‘different, but not inferior’ – to men, and made frequent comparisons between the ‘honour’ of men in performing military service and the ‘honour’ of women in their battle as the bearers of the next generation.

In reality women came to exercise very little control in the Third Reich, even in the separate sphere assigned to them. After 1933 the male-dominated Nazi leadership preferred to recruit more passive women who would be content to implement policies handed down from above. Gertrude Scholtz-Klink, eventually appointed as head of the Women’s Bureau in 1945, was typical in this respect. With her classic Aryan looks and her four children she represented the ideal ‘Gretchen’ type, displaying those simple womanly virtues – comradeship, self-sacrifice and devotion to family – which the Nazis were attempting to encourage. Her guiding principle was always that women should campaign not against men, but alongside them, and as Frauenführerin she sought to maintain the illusion that she had created considerable autonomy for women within their own sphere of activity. In reality, however, she was excluded from all high level discussions, even when these affected areas which directly concerned women, such as plans to mobilise female labour during the war. In 1942, for instance, when she suggested that the benefits of child subsidies be extended to women factory workers, she was told by the director of the Labour Front, Robert Ley, that volksbiologisch, or racial, biological considerations must be put before the needs of the war economy.

Meanwhile, the known promiscuity of top political leaders, the divorce reform act of 1938, leading to a steady increase in the number of legal separations, the official encouragement given to children who inform on their parents, and conscription, forcing more and more men to live away from home, increasingly exposed the contradictions in Nazi pro-family rhetoric. Scholtz-Klink and her social workers were expected to
play an active role in ideological indoctrination and the promotion of eugenics and 'racial awareness' among the women in their care, whilst collecting the names of those deemed fit for sterilisation or the euthanasia programme. The introduction of the Lebensborn programme, whereby specially selected women were encouraged to 'donate a baby to the Führer' by having illegitimate children by SS officers, also represented a radical departure from traditional family values with no parallels either in the German past or in contemporary fascist movements.

Koonz, however, takes her argument one stage further. By surrendering their political rights in return for the honour and prestige bestowed on them as mothers in the fatherland, she argues, German women ultimately played an equal role in helping to make war and genocide possible. Whilst Nazi men launched their racially-charged war of conquest in the east, Nazi women were equally busy creating their own domestic Lebensraum (living space) in the form of a private retreat from the outside world. In particular, she claims, the Nazis made efforts to select men from 'good family backgrounds' to oversee the mass killings in the concentration camps. The role of their wives was to preserve 'an illusion of love in an environment of hatred', and 'a place of contact with the more humane self', which provided a kind of 'ersatz sanity' for those who worked daily with mass murder.

Controversial as Koonz's conclusion may be, her work has undoubtedly been of major importance in demonstrating the importance of women's history in examining all historical issues, even when this might put women themselves in a bad light. As she herself argues, it is only by examining the everyday banality of evil that we can begin to appreciate the true horrors of the holocaust.

However, German women were by no means always predetermined to act in the way Koonz's work suggests, and there are other, equally important ways in which they can be seen as actors in the Third Reich. Whilst undoubtedly, many women did play their part in making life unbearable for 'racially undesirable' citizens, those directly involved in implementing Nazi policies were at best a small minority. Rather, as an earlier study by Tim Mason ('Women in Germany 1925-1940. Family, Welfare and Work', History Workshop Journal, Part 1 Spring 1976, Part 2 Autumn 1976) reveals, the most significant trend in Nazi family life was towards the ideal of the small suburban middle class family. This he sees as a specific reaction to the demands made on women's lives by increasing industrialisation and bureaucratisation, which was not just peculiar to Nazi Germany, but is very much a part of contemporary Western life. It explains the popularity of the Nazi Marriage Loan scheme, which enabled many young women to escape the boredom of routine work by getting married and setting up home, but significantly, it also led to resistance towards the Nazi drive to increase the birth rate, and later towards the regime's efforts to encourage women to leave their domesticity for war work. Overall, as Mason notes, the mobilisation of women for war production was strikingly inefficient when compared to that of wartime Britain. Even after Hitler's ideological objections to the conscription of married women were finally overcome after the reversal of Stalingrad in 1943, many women continued to find ways of avoiding it, some of them ironically by deliberately getting pregnant.

Much early work on resistance explicitly excludes this struggle by women against the encroachments of a rational-bureaucratic state on their private sphere and proceeds from the conventional view that resistance was only possible among those who were committed anti-Nazis before 1933. Even Mason is content to argue that:

The low level of women's participation in the resistance groups of all political persuasions, in particular the conservative resistance, also points in the direction of a high degree of passive acceptance of the regime by women.
the imminent dangers. During the war itself even providing food to foreign deportees or addressing them in their own language became a punishable offence, and thus by definition an act of resistance.

Indeed, Koonz herself recognises that in certain contexts motherhood could take on a different meaning from the one which informs the main part of her book. In her chapter on Jewish women, she notes that: ‘Whilst men did their best to cope with the hostile world of business, profession and bureaucracy, women struggled to preserve their families as a refuge from a menacing world outside’. In the concentration camps people used to form themselves into little groups of ‘ersatz families’ as a source of private comfort from the sheer terror and madness of reality. In both these instances women can be found doing exactly what Koonz attacks German women in general for doing – providing a private sphere of love in an environment of hatred – and yet here the contrast between love and terror takes on an entirely different meaning. The family unit, often headed by the woman in cases where the husband had been killed or taken prisoner, also remained for a long time after the war the only institution left which could provide the Germans with a measure of sanity as they picked through the ruins of the ‘thousand-year Reich’.

One of the major themes, then, which emerges from an analysis of women as actors in the Third Reich is the essential ambiguity of their position as mothers in the fatherland. Claudia Koonz is correct to suggest that the promise of greater autonomy within the traditional sphere of female activity persuaded significant numbers of women in the early 1930s to acquiesce in the removal of their (only recently won) political rights. However, her attempt to link this to a collective female responsibility for the crimes of Nazism breaks down because of its failure to do justice to the wide variety of strategies employed by women in the struggle to define their own Lebensraum. This struggle did not simply cease after 1935, but increasingly provided women with the means of creating their own opportunities for political action along a broad spectrum of activity, from defence of their own private ‘space’ against the intrusion of a totalitarian state, to a more conscious and active resistance to Nazism.

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