

# WEAPONIZED WOMANHOOD: HOW GERMAN WOMEN WERE COMPLICIT IN THEIR DEPRIVATION OF AGENCY

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*In this essay, the topic of gender roles in Germany between the Weimar Republic and the Nazi regime is analyzed closely. Though women made major strides in establishing their rights to individual liberty following World War I, the onset of the Nazi era in Germany led to a precipitous drop in their involvement in wider society. The evidence for this includes an analysis of the guidelines of popular women's clubs, university and government policies, as well as individual examples. What is remarkable about this event is that this was not done to women by men alone-- women across political boundaries worked together to architect their removal from public view.*

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In Nazi era Germany, women were accessory to the deprivation of their own individual rights by the state. This was due to a complex blend of eugenic ideology and desire for sexual and economic freedoms that were being demanded by women at the time.<sup>1</sup> It pervaded all levels of society; women, including Jewish women and women from all political spheres, utilized eugenic thinking to promote ideas of who 'should' be breeding.<sup>2</sup> Upon the ascension of the Nazi party, instead of fighting back against the extremely misogynist ideals promoted by party ideology, women's rights groups simply disbanded.<sup>3</sup> This led to many women joining the rising wave of Nazi racial purity theory, which was greatly supported by the foundation of

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<sup>1</sup>Ann Taylor Allen. "Feminism and Eugenics in Germany and Britain, 1900-1940: A Comparative Perspective." *German Studies Review* 23, no. 3 (2000): 479-478. Weinstein, Valeric. "Working Weimar Women into the National Socialist Community: Carl Froelich's Women's Labor Service Film, *Ich Für Dich—Du Für Mich* (1934), and *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931)." *Women in German Yearbook* 25 (2009): 29-30.

<sup>2</sup>Allen, 484-490. Prue Chamberlayne. "The Mothers' Manifesto and Disputes over 'Mütterlichkeit'." *Feminist Review*, no. 35 (1990): 17-18.

<sup>3</sup>Allen, 493.

eugenic schools of thought and mother's rights that German feminists had fought hard to have recognized.<sup>4</sup> In the National Socialist era, women were complicit in how they were funneled by the government into jobs traditionally considered 'women's work,' despite the popularity of feminist thought in the Weimar era. They bought in to the propaganda fed to them by the government and did not seek to affect great change despite intrusion into their rights over their bodies and personal lives.<sup>5</sup> This meant that women were used as a tool to spread Nazi ideology throughout the country via their direction into social, public facing sectors of the workforce.

In the Weimar era, there was political division over the role of women in the work force and at home.<sup>6</sup> Women left the role of housewife to join the legions of German workers, which lead to a precipitous drop in birth rates as their priorities shifted.<sup>7</sup> Women were more interested in starting careers and lives in the public sphere instead of the domestic sphere.<sup>8</sup> There was a trend towards women being interested in and socially encouraged to be more cosmopolitan and interested in education. This was horrifying to German policy makers due to a national 'pronatal' ideal.<sup>9</sup> They desired more German children due to their need for more people to fulfill a national vision embedded during the era of the German empire: the more Aryan people, the better served the country would be.<sup>10</sup> As a result, German feminists and women's advocacy groups grappled with this ideal and utilized it in their rhetoric to justify their desires. Women's advocacy groups such as the *Bund für Mutterschutz* (BfM) and *Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine* (BDF) argued that the uplifting of mothers as the spiritual heart of Germany was essential, and the BfM especially argued that eugenic policies against 'inferior' births needed to be in place.<sup>11</sup> 'Unwanted' and 'damaged' children needed to be avoided in order to preserve the 'purity' of the German people.<sup>12</sup> For them, the intended result of such arguments was that the sexual freedom of women meant they would have access to birth control and could choose when they could become mothers.<sup>13</sup> They took advantage of the inability of marginalized women to speak for themselves and repudiate claims that they needed to be stopped from having children.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Allen, 490-494.

<sup>5</sup>Allen, 494.

<sup>6</sup>Chamberlayne, 17-18.

<sup>7</sup>Chamberlayne, 17-18.

<sup>8</sup>Chamberlayne, 17-18; Charu Gupta. "Politics of Gender: Women in Nazi Germany." *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 17 (1991): 42-43.

<sup>9</sup>Allen, 488.

<sup>10</sup>Allen, 488.

<sup>11</sup>Allen, 484-490; Gupta, 17.

<sup>12</sup>Allen, 485-490.

<sup>13</sup>Allen, 485; Gupta, 40-41.

<sup>14</sup>Gupta, 46.

The Nazi party had very specific ideas about a woman's place in the world, with Hitler bluntly saying that they were in charge of the household and men were in charge of the public sector.<sup>15</sup> Though many feminist groups in Germany were wary of Nazi ideals and disagreed with their desire to force women out of the workplace, they did not go so far as to protest loudly against them, even before the Nazis were in power.<sup>16</sup> Instead, they simply disbanded their groups rather than toe the Nazi party line that was dictated to them.<sup>17</sup> In order to increase the birth rate and relegate women to the purely domestic sphere, the Nazi regime pushed for women to do their duty to the country by procreating and 'protecting' the home. Ironically the work that both mainstream and radical feminist groups had done to promote the ideal of the mother as a saintly figure only gave legitimacy to the Nazi rhetoric.<sup>18</sup> By disbanding they also left numerous women jobless, and their only equivalent options were Nazi sponsored groups. Thus, women were driven straight into the arms of the Nazis and were vulnerable to their ideals. As well, the advances in the workplace that women had achieved in the Interwar Period were becoming stale; with the return of the men, women were relegated to the most menial and laborious jobs in the industrial and service industries.<sup>19</sup> This was compounded with fears brought on by the Depression that women were 'taking' jobs away from hardworking men.<sup>20</sup> This social and economic climate made it easier for Nazi policy makers to convince women to give up working and return to homemaking.

The intensity of the propaganda was unevenly applied depending on one's social status.<sup>21</sup> Abortion laws were deeply invasive at the time; in 1933 the Nazi party instituted strong laws limiting access to contraceptives and stopped access to abortions entirely unless permitted by the state, in order to increase birth rates.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, women who were on the fringes of society were discouraged from procreating and saw the nastier face of the government.<sup>23</sup> "Undesirable" women were sterilized in mass numbers in accordance with the values of eugenics and a 'healthier Aryan race.'<sup>24</sup> The eugenics policies of government lead sterilization deemed that it was acceptable for force to be used to achieve its goals because the

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<sup>15</sup>Chamberlayne, 19.

<sup>16</sup>Allen, 493.

<sup>17</sup>Allen, 493.

<sup>18</sup>Chamberlayne, 19.

<sup>19</sup>Mouton, Michelle. "From Adventure and Advancement to Derailment and Demotion: Effects of Nazi Gender Policy on Women's Careers and Lives." *Journal of Social History* 43, no. 4 (2010): 945-946.

<sup>20</sup>Patmore, Greg. "Germany." In *Worker Voice: Employee Representation in the Workplace in Australia, Canada, Germany, the UK and the US 1914-1939*, 164. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016.

<sup>21</sup>Chamberlayne, 20; Gupta, 40.

<sup>22</sup>Gupta, 40-41.

<sup>23</sup>Gupta, 40-41.

<sup>24</sup>Gupta, 40-41.

victims were a danger to the German people.<sup>25</sup> This was ostensibly to prevent the birth of defective children, but statistical evidence shows how unevenly the policy was truly applied, a fact that was well known at the time.<sup>26</sup> Jewish women, Romani women, and women of 'socially inferior class' were all targeted directly, thus they were the ones who protested their treatment. This only caused ethnically white women to double down on their convictions that eugenics were necessary because women's liberation movements were further associated with 'otherness' due to their advocates.<sup>27</sup> This was due to racist and classist thinking on the part of policy-makers. The protests by marginalized groups had the effect of bolstering Nazi plans because of a desire to reject anything associated with the Jewish people and other 'undesirables.'

Under the National Socialist government, the ideal German woman was sympathetic and emotional, but she was not the same as the Victorian ideal of a frail, delicate lady.<sup>28</sup> A German woman was supposed to be strong, athletic, and willing to do anything to support her country and the future of her race.<sup>29</sup> Above all else, she was required to produce as many offspring as possible, and nothing should stand in her way.<sup>30</sup> Their policies encouraged women to work, though in specific fields that reinforced the gender stereotypes that the government was promoting. These included fields such as nursing, teaching children, cooking, and other 'soft' roles.<sup>31</sup> The National Socialist party justified their demand for women to enter the workforce in these positions by saying that it was for the common good, and that women were better suited to perform these roles.<sup>32</sup> To ensure they had no choice but to pursue these positions, new acceptance standards for universities were put into place.<sup>33</sup> Starting in secondary school, girls were funneled into courses that focused on skills related to domestic service. They were deliberately denied math and English courses in order to stop them from developing interests in those fields.<sup>34</sup> This resulted in them not being able to qualify for most universities that would have allowed them to study to join professions that were too 'mannish' for them, such as doctors, lawyers, and engineers. Women abruptly stopped enrolling in post-secondary education, with university rates dropping precipitously from a high of 91% in 1923 to 5.6% in 1934. Girls and women who had started the qualification process before the new laws came into effect found that they were not

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<sup>25</sup>Allen, 484-496.

<sup>26</sup>Gupta, 40-41.

<sup>27</sup>Gupta, 40.

<sup>28</sup>Mouton, 950.

<sup>29</sup>Gupta, 42.

<sup>30</sup>Jane Caplan. "The Administration of Gender Identity in Nazi Germany." *History Workshop Journal*, no. 72 (2011): 171-80.

<sup>31</sup>Gupta, 40; Mouton, 947-948.

<sup>32</sup>Mouton, 947-948.

<sup>33</sup>Mouton, 947-950.

<sup>34</sup>Mouton, 948-950.

hired and were relegated to finding jobs that were considered more gender-appropriate until they married and left the workforce. For many women, this effectively guided them out of the workforce entirely, as there was a drop in employed women in Germany after the laws were put in place.

In addition, there were financial penalties for families with 'double earners' and rewards for married couples if the women were not working.<sup>35</sup> Penalties must be considered in the financial climate of the time: due to the recession, money was tight for most families, regardless of social status. For working men, penalties included excess taxes, and doctors with wives that worked were not allowed to claim money back for seeing patients with insurance.<sup>36</sup> Women could be fired without cause if they were from a family of 'double earners' and they now no longer had any advocates to speak for them regarding the improvement of pay, hours, and working conditions.<sup>37</sup> Rewards took the form of loans that were available to married couples if the wife wasn't working and free access to certain tests required of doctors to remain certified.<sup>38</sup> With such two pronged tactics, social conformity was assured.

Another policy the National Socialist Party enacted in order to control women and direct their life choices was to shut down church youth groups and demand national women's organizations follow strict standards that promoted Nazi ideals.<sup>39</sup> The BDF, the biggest women's organization at the time, folded.<sup>40</sup> This left the Nazi party with a monopoly on women's groups, which meant that they could dictate what women were being taught and what was being promoted as important values. A call went out to German women to ask them to join the Nazi sponsored groups: the National Socialist Women's Organization (NSF) and the Reich Mothers Program.<sup>41</sup> To compound matters, in order to be allowed to join post-secondary institutions, one was required to have actively participated in the national German girls youth group, the League of German Girls (BMD) or the Reich Work Services (RAD).<sup>42</sup> As a result, women were left with no other choice than to join the government sponsored youth groups that took the place of the former church youth groups and community groups, which led to a greater influence on the part of the government at a more susceptible age.<sup>43</sup> These youth groups encouraged specific sets of behaviours and career directions. Girls participated in athletic activities to encourage physical fitness, as well as volunteer activities to help the poor and assist

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<sup>35</sup>Mouton, 950.

<sup>36</sup>Mouton, 950.

<sup>37</sup>Mouton, 950.

<sup>38</sup>Mouton, 950.

<sup>39</sup>Chamberlayne, 19-20; Allen., 493-494.

<sup>40</sup>Chamberlayne, 19-20.

<sup>41</sup>Mouton, 948.

<sup>42</sup>Mouton, 948.

<sup>43</sup>Mouton, 948-950.

soldiers, such as singing for them while they were in the hospital.<sup>44</sup> They were also encouraged to move away from any communities that might entice them to question the government, such as religious communities that might divide loyalty between the leaders of the church and the state.<sup>45</sup> It was carefully orchestrated propaganda that kept women complacent from a young age and created general feelings of warmth towards the government. It discouraged women from questioning the state laws that sought to control their bodies. Thus, girls were trained from a young age to be obedient to the desires of their politicians.

Women were encouraged to work in specific settings that were considered appropriate for their gender, such as social work, teaching, and nursing. They felt grateful to the government for creating new job opportunities for them: the Nazi party utilized the BDM to create job openings for women that had been left empty by the Christian groups and the BDF after their dismissal and dissolution, respectively.<sup>46</sup> There were a myriad of new job openings in social wellness fields. The BDM offered the chance for women to open health clinics and daycares, as well as advice clinics that taught domestic skills and gave parenting tips.<sup>47</sup> This was due to the fact that they were helping people who were considered racially appropriate by society and thus they were largely rewarded for their work by the state.<sup>48</sup> The desire to help the individuals the women were dealing with specifically superseded their ability to acknowledge other, less savoury, policies of the government. As the war effort mounted and the Nazi party recognized that they would need women's help in factories, they justified this using their ideology as well. They claimed that women were actually very well suited to repetitive assembly line work because it meant they did not have to take their minds off of their families at home.<sup>49</sup> This had the effect of reinforcing that working women should still put their family above all else. Serving the state was just another way to support her family. The political spin on the policies made women feel as if their choices were voluntary and they were happy to contribute to their governments' cause.

The feminist rhetoric that the Weimar women had set up had the unintended side effect of bolstering Nazi ideas about eugenics and racial purity. Their goal of continuing the emancipating women and creating greater equality between the sexes was foiled by the Great Depression, as their insistence on representation in the workplace only made men and non-working women resent them for supposedly making it harder for men to find jobs.<sup>50</sup> The feminist movement became a symbol

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<sup>44</sup>Mouton, 946.

<sup>45</sup>Mouton, 948.

<sup>46</sup>Gupta, 42.

<sup>47</sup>Mouton, 949.

<sup>48</sup>Mouton, 949- 950.

<sup>49</sup>Mouton, 950-952.

<sup>50</sup>Gupta, 40-41.

that made the Nazi regime stronger by its demonizing of the women in the group and highlighting of the fact that racial inferior women were part of it.<sup>51</sup> German women fell into a trap of their own making. Women worked depending on what field they wanted to go into, and they were foiled if they tried to make career plans outside of what the state wanted for them.<sup>52</sup> This was so extensive that most women did not realize it was happening to them on a personal level. This was likely due to a desire to assert agency over their lives and to the idea that the government would not be able to so effectively meddle with them as individuals.<sup>53</sup> Instead of complaining women frequently chose careers that fit with Nazi ideology and happily left the workforce when it was demanded of them.<sup>54</sup> Thus, they perpetuated their own suffering and played into the hands of the Nazi party

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<sup>51</sup>Gupta, 40.

<sup>52</sup> Mouton, 948.

<sup>53</sup> Mouton, 945-950.

<sup>54</sup> Mouton, 948-950.

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