

KINDER, KIRCHE, KUECHE: WOMEN IN NAZI GERMANY

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The government of Nazi Germany's ideology for the place of women promoted a return to 'traditional' roles such as marriage, motherhood and family. However, the policies they put in place tell a different story. Although they led women to believe that their main role was to increase the birth rate of the country, the government was performing forced abortions and sterilizations. Women were meant to aspire to marriage, yet the government created 'Breeding' camps where women would be impregnated by officers they did not know, for the good of the country. Despite wanting a return to the sacred family life, children were asked to report on the discussions their parents had and remain loyal to the state above all else. This essay will discuss the contradictions between the ideology of the Nazi government and their policies in regard to the role of women.

Living under the Nazi regime in World War II Germany, women struggled with their identity. Government-mandated livelihoods in direct opposition to Nazi beliefs and the idealization of the female role in society and family matters became a point of contention. This meant that although women were encouraged to increase the birth rate, the Nazi government was using sterilization and abortion procedures on particular groups of women giving birth. Alternatively, women were deemed responsible to bring back the "traditional" and sacred family values, at a time when the government encouraged children to report their parents for potential subversion. The Nazi Government even went as far as to set up "breeding" camps, in addition to maintaining that women should be domesticated, yet requiring them to work in factories. This essay will discuss the contradictions between the ideology of the Nazi government and their policies regarding the role of women.

Women's primary role in the Nazi regime was to be mothers. They were seen as either the 'Mothers of the Race' who were of pure Aryan stock or 'Inferior Women' who were to be discouraged and prevented from procreating. The ideal Aryan woman was German by appearance, behaviour and mannerisms. She was to be athletic, strong and healthy; qualities which not only ensured she could bear

children but that she could also be put to work for the Reich.¹ Women were expected, in times of war and peace, to be physically capable of replacing their husbands and doing their duty for their country (which could mean working in factories, working on farms or in other traditionally male-dominated labour roles), while also keeping their children fed and their house clean.² Women who fit these criteria and had no history of any sort of physical illness or mental disorder were encouraged in many ways to procreate.

First, the government ensured that married couples who had children were economically compensated. If a wife had been working and gave up her job when she married, the husband was entitled to a 'Marriage Loan.' This would mean that the wife was able to continue to get pregnant and stay home without worrying about finances. The loan was introduced in 1933, had very low interest rates and if one had four children, their debt was cleared.³ There were also inheritance and income tax rebates for families. In 1934 a tax on the childless was added to help fund these loans.⁴ In many ways, the Nazi government encouraged women to live their lives in service to the Reich's needs.

Secondly, the Nazi government closed all birth control clinics and banned contraceptives. By making these inaccessible, the number of women who became pregnant increased. The Nazi government also raised the penalties for abortion, which in 1927 had been reduced.⁵ As Dr Charu Gupta, Professor of History at the University of Delhi, states, "From 1935 on, doctors and midwives were obliged to notify the regional state health office of all miscarriages. Women's names and addresses were then handed over to the police, who investigated the cases suspected of being actually abortions."⁶ These measures were taken to increase the potential amount of service the Reich would receive once these babies came of working age.

Thirdly, propaganda and party slogans were used to encourage these women to procreate. Pamphlets glorifying the role of mothers were distributed, Mother's Day became a nation-wide celebration and prolific mothers were given the 'Honour Cross' as recognition for doing their duty to their country.⁷ The Honour Cross was

¹Leila J. Rupp. "Mother of the "Volk": The Image of Women in Nazi Ideology." *Signs* 3, no. 2 (1977): 362-79.

²George Duby, Michelle Perrot, and Pauline Schmitt. Pantel. *A History of Women in the West*. Vol. 5. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994, 162.

³Duby, Perrott and Schmitt, "A History of Women in the West," 165.

⁴Duby, Perrott and Schmitt, 165.

⁵George Duby, Michelle Perrot, and Pauline Schmitt. Pantel. *A History of Women in the West*. Vol. 5. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994, 162.

⁶Charu Gupta. "Politics of Gender: Women in Nazi Germany." *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 17 (1991): WS40-S48.

⁷Rupp, Leila J. "Mother of the "Volk,"" 370-371.

given to the women who had gone above and beyond their role as mothers and received a high level of respect from the German people.

Many women however were considered 'inferior.' They were of different races; Gypsies, Jews, Blacks, Roma or anyone who was visibly different or from lower classes; prostitutes, servants and unskilled workers, were excluded as well as any woman who had any sort of mental or emotional 'defect' (this could be depression, schizophrenia, epilepsy or any sort of proven or alleged "feeble mindedness.")⁸ This meant that a large portion of the female population had to be stopped from procreating.

To ensure this, the Nazi government used propaganda, with a focus on the philosophical concept of Anti-natalism.⁹ This was a concrete way for the Nazi party to further their socio-political ideologies on the German people. They also used education. In school textbooks for the girls, there were twelve pages on the possibility of "having to sterilize one's child" and the prohibitions of race interaction as opposed to the three pages on the "Glory of Motherhood."¹⁰ This shows how the Nazi government prioritized the 'Master Race' over the role of women as mothers.

In 1933, the Nazi government mandated eugenic sterilization to include all women who were deemed 'inferior.' A new medical department within the government was created to find such women and use force if necessary to ensure they were sterilized.¹¹ In 1935, when the government mandated abortion as a severe crime, punishable by death, they did so with the exception that doctors were able to perform abortions for eugenic reasons. This meant that if an 'inferior' woman became pregnant, it was the doctor's duty to ensure that the baby was aborted and the woman subsequently sterilized.¹² Abortion became a tool for the government to prevent the birth of these children who would not fit into the new Aryan Race.

In 1939, the Nazi government took their plan a step further when they introduced the idea of the "Annihilation of Unworthy Life."¹³ Euthanasia was used as a tool to dispose of those who were not a part of the 'Aryan' race. This begun mainly in asylums and hospitals with patients (both male and female) who were seen as being incurable, but would escalate as a way to rid the nation of entire ethnicities; principally but not exclusively, the Jews.¹⁴

⁸Duby, Perrott and Schmitt, 152.

⁹Duby, Perrott and Schmitt, 169.

¹⁰Duby, Perrott and Schmitt, 155.

¹¹Duby, Perrott and Schmitt, 152.

¹²Duby, Perrott and Schmitt, 165.

¹³Duby, Perrott and Schmitt, 155.

¹⁴Duby, Perrott and Schmitt, 155.

Another priority for the Nazi regime was to bring back traditional family values and ensure that the family was a sacred unit with marriage at its heart; however, they also encouraged prostitution, encouraged children to report on their parents and set up ‘breeding camps.’ During the late 1930s, as Nazi power stabilized and they no longer needed the support of the Catholic Church, reforms were put in place to ensure that regulated brothels were re-introduced.¹⁵ The reasons for this were two-fold, firstly the police and specifically Heinrich Himmler, the commanding officer of the Schutzstaffel (SS), believed this was the best way to control the criminal network of prostitution. Secondly, with the Second World War being planned, the Nazis saw this as an opportunity to ensure that morale was high for the troops, while ensuring that venereal diseases were not being spread.¹⁶ With the brothels under their control, they could ensure that the prostitutes were tested for diseases, were not part of the ‘undesirable’ races and, as Dr Annette Timm explains, “valuable men were sexually satisfied.”¹⁷ By allowing the men in the military to have extramarital affairs with prostitutes, they believed they were giving men a sexual outlet so they could focus on the challenges at hand while out on the field. However, this clearly went against the propaganda of the ‘German family’ and how important marriage was to the Nazi government. Himmler ensured this was used to the government’s advantage by also creating the “Lebensborn” scheme. Created in 1935, this was designed to give financial support to families that had racially pure children and to encourage men and women who were of pure Aryan stock to help repopulate Germany.¹⁸ Himmler recognized an opportunity and decided to test this idea by using the SS men to impregnate women who had passed a series of physical and mental health examinations, background checks and were proven to be “pure” Aryan women.¹⁹ The scheme also ensured that the pregnant (often unwed) women received high end prenatal treatment and that when the babies were born, they were closely followed by doctors to ensure that they had the best chance of survival.²⁰ By being given the best care in the first few years of their lives, the government hoped that these children would grow to be healthy and strong fighters and breeders for the Reich.

By encouraging the Lebensborn scheme, the Nazis were encouraging men to have extramarital affairs to increase the birth rate, and to further the purification of the Aryan race. They were actively encouraging women who were unwed to use their wombs for the benefit of the race and country, while continuing to promote the idea

¹⁵Julia Roos. "Backlash against Prostitutes' Rights: Origins and Dynamics of Nazi Prostitution Policies." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. 1/2 (2002): 86.

¹⁶Roos, “Backlash against Prostitutes’ Rights,” 87.

¹⁷Annette Timm. “Sex with a Purpose: Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and Militarized Masculinity in the Third Reich.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, (2002): 226.

¹⁸Larry Thompson. "Lebensborn and the Eugenics Policy of the Reichsführer-SS." *Central European History* 4, no. 1 (1971): 54. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.langara.bc.ca/stable/4545592>.

¹⁹Thompson, “Lebensborn and the Eugenics Policy of the Reichsführer-SS,” 60.

²⁰Thompson, 61.

of the importance of marriage and family. In addition, there was a rise in teenage pregnancy during this time, previously these situations were considered shameful, but now the young girls and boys boasted about this as they were doing their duty to the country by breeding babies as soon as they could.²¹ These conflicting ideas both had the same goal, to repopulate Germany with pure Aryan babies.

Despite the traditional ideology of a loving and close-knit family, the Nazi government was constantly encouraging children to report on their parents. They were indoctrinated from a very young age through the public education system as well as through various extracurricular groups such as the Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls.²² Children were led to believe that they could trust their government more than their parents. They were encouraged to report on their parents and were often asked to write essays on what they overheard their parents speaking about at home, and their political opinions.²³ Author and researcher Paul Roland states, "Far from preserving the traditional German family as it had promised to do, the regime was actively isolating the children from parental influence and working on each family member to ensure that their loyalty was primarily to the party."²⁴ Distrust among family members grew as the relationship between child and country became more important than the relationship between child and parent.

The role of mother was a top priority for the ideal Aryan woman. However, domestic chores were also her responsibility as the archetypal German wives kept good homes. Due to economic hardship and wartime, women were called to do their duty to the state and participate in the war effort, which often got in the way of their domestic chores. Women were expected to work not only during war time but also as a service to the country when the country needed economic support. However, they were paid a third less than their male colleagues, excluding the price of transport to and from the factories, as well as any food the company provided.²⁵ In 1933 there were 11.5 million officially registered female employees, and by 1939, this had gone up to 12.8 million, a huge increase even before female conscription was introduced in January 1943.²⁶ During the war, a large portion of women worked in munitions factories where their shifts could be between 12-14 hours, which would mean that all the shops would be closed and their children would likely be in bed when they returned.²⁷ Although the fact that they were employed falls into line with some aspects of the Ideal Aryan woman (mainly that

²¹Paul Roland. *Life in the Third Reich: Daily Life in Nazi Germany 1933-1945*. London: Arcturus, 2018, 60.

²²Paul Roland, "Life in the Third Reich," 42.

²³Paul Roland, 54.

²⁴Paul Roland, 53-54.

²⁵Paul Roland, 35-36.

²⁶Duby, Perrott and Schmitt, 158.

²⁷Paul Roland, 36.

she should be fit and athletic and able to do her part for her country) it directly contrasts the push on domesticity and the role of women primarily as mothers. Women viewed themselves not only as mothers, but as active members of the state who had something to give other than their womb. Children and young adults had to fend for themselves or be put into the care of youth groups. These had the main goal for the boys of being trained for the military, and for the girls the three Ks, "*Kinder, Kirche, Kueche*" (Children, church and kitchen).²⁸ So although the girls were being taught that their main responsibilities lay in their children, the church and the kitchen, they were seeing their mothers working traditionally male dominated jobs.

In conclusion, it is clear that despite the Nazi ideology of women as married mothers who stayed home, the Nazi government were contradicting themselves by creating policies that directly opposed this idealized view. They encouraged women to procreate and give birth to as many babies as possible, however this only applied to some women; the women deemed 'pure' by the government, while the other women were suffering forced abortions and sterilization due to their ethnicities or illnesses. The Nazi government was simultaneously holding up marriage and family as sacred entities; yet dividing the family by encouraging extramarital affairs, children to report on their parents and by bringing back regulated brothels. Finally, they were teaching girls that their place was in the home, yet under the Nazi regime, there was an increase in the overall numbers of female employees and even conscription for the war effort. Although the Nazis' view of women is often simplified, it is demonstrated that beneath the surface, they had a vision of a pure German race and they were willing to make ideological sacrifices in order to obtain it, particularly regarding their female citizens.

²⁸ Stephen Pagaard, "Teaching the Nazi Dictatorship: Focus on Youth." *The History Teacher* 38, no. 2 (2005): 196.

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