

WOMEN'S WOMBS AS WEAPONS: THE IMPORTANCE AND COORDINATION OF MOTHERHOOD IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE THIRD REICH

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Throughout history, the actions of men through war, conquest, politics, and power tend to be the aspects in which the greatest importance is placed. As a result of this power imbalance, usually only asserted by men, it is easy to overlook women playing an underlying, yet ubiquitous, role as well. One example that fits this description perfectly is Adolf Hitler's coordination of power in Nazi Germany and the subsequent political, social, and physical repercussions his Nationalist Socialist policies and ideologies had on women at the home front. When the American public hears terms such as "Nazi Germany" or "World War II", they tend to think of either the militaristic stratagem of this time or the barbaric genocide of the Holocaust. While those aforementioned aspects are exceedingly important to consider when thinking of the atrocities of this time, one major theme that is often overlooked is the lives of the women and the families they cared for in Germany itself. Utilizing wombs as weapons, Nazi ideology incorporated a violent reestablishment of separate spheres in an effort to propagate their "race and space" war efforts.

In a war dominated by male fighters and male political leaders, the role that women, mothers, and young girls played for the Third Reich was crucial for the "race" aspect of the "space and race" goal of Aryan ideals and Nazi power. "Race and space" is a term frequently used in academia when referring to Nazi ideology of preserving the "Master Race" of the Aryans, as the Nazi party so deftly designated

them¹. To unpack this term, it is important to look at the race aspect differently from, but connected to, the space aspect of “race and space.” According to Nazi racial ideology, if a race was not expanding, it was dwindling. The first way that Nazis could ensure the Aryan race would expand was to have more pure blood Aryan children. Even more important to this racial expansion, Nazi logic held that there needed to be more literal geographic room for their race to expand. Subsequently, the German army and Aryan race needed to invade other countries that were seemingly “below” them, evolutionarily speaking, in order to make sure Aryans had enough space and resources to provide for the future children and adults responsible for preserving the race’s success. With their efforts to provide the race with more space, women were being tailored, taught, revered, and even forced to play along with the idea that women, the “saviors of the Aryan race”, were the key to Aryan success within the Nazi agenda.

Exclusion of women from the political realm was the first most important way that the Nationalist Socialists would control the course of women’s futures. As early as 1934, Adolf Hitler urged the women of Nazi Germany, particularly women that would further his Aryan agenda of racial purification, to become mothers. Following his ideology, politics were too blunt for women’s minds to either fully comprehend or would allow the innocent brains of women to be warped². Being a mother, in Hitler’s perspective, was the greatest gift a woman could give to the state. According to an article from the New York Times in 1934 regarding a speech by Hitler, he not only condemns women in politics, but also goes so far as to call feminism a “Jewish product.” The article offers, “‘Liberalism’ Herr Hitler told them, ‘has a large number of points for women’s equality. The Nazi

1 Richard Bessel. (2004) “The Nazi Capture of Power.” *Journal of Contemporary History*. 39(2), 169-188.

2 Roderick Stackelberg and Sally A. Winkle. *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook: An Anthology of Texts*. (London: Routledge, 2002), 182-84.

program for women has but one: this is a child. While man makes his supreme sacrifice on the battlefield, woman fights her supreme battle for her nation when she gives life to a child.””³ The exclusion of women from politics was not a new idea for the Nationalist Socialists. Now more than ever, the idea of active exclusion of women from the political process was becoming regulated. Not only that, but the importance of motherhood was being equated to the importance of war for the expansion of the Aryan race. With that being said, the exclusion of women from the political process made it easier to implement the ideology of “race and space” because it had become actual policy.

Even though women were to end up eventually taking care of and raising children, as well as making the home a place of comfort and education, young girls and women could attain partially “powerful” positions by belonging to certain Nazi clubs and organizations. For example, young girls could belong to the Bund Deutscher Mädel, or League of German Girls and older women could belong to the NS-Frauenschaft, or Nationalist Socialist Women’s League. These two organizations not only had women preparing for motherhood and domesticity with educational courses and doctrines, but these organizations also placed heavy importance upon young girls, presumably of the Hitler Youth, to aspire to be strong, courageous, and physically fit for their nation.⁴ The leader of the NS-Frauenschaft in 1936, Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, provides for us what exactly she would like to see the women of Nazi Germany aspire to throughout her speech. Scholtz-Klink said, “The National Socialist movement sees the man and the woman as equal bearers of Germany’s future. It asks, however, for more than in the past: that each should first completely accomplish the tasks that are appropriate to his or her nature. The woman, besides caring for her own children, should first care for those

3 “Hitler Condemns Women in Politics,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 09 1934.

4 Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 398.

who need her help as mothers of the nation.”⁵

This idea of a woman as only being a mother and not having any sort of career advancement or future to look forward to other than these indoctrinating clubs, was something the citizens of the United States were not enthusiastic about. We can see the skepticism of Nazi motherhood in a New York Times article from 1934. The journalist, Elizabeth Wiskemann, provides, “Of the woman taken out of employment in Germany it may be said in general that, if she is pleased about not having to work, her satisfaction is offset by the high prices she must pay out of a smaller income. If she is glad that her husband and sons are no longer idle, she is sorry that they are away camping or making roads, for her family life has been disrupted and there is no more money to show for it.”⁶ Through this primary document, we can see that even citizens in America, even though in the 1930’s career opportunities were still very gendered, were just not able to accept the fact that Nazi ideology wanted women to subscribe to the notion that they were only useful for making children for Hitler’s army and the subsequent take-over of Germany, Europe, and essentially, the world. Not only that, but this article allows us to see how the women of Germany could potentially feel about this new role for them that they had no room to discuss or question. For once, the feelings of these women were being taken into account and not by the Nationalist Socialists, but by the people of the United States.

In keeping up with negative American attitudes toward German women having little to no career advancement, another article from The New York Times in 1935 demonstrates the air of defeatism that American citizens believed these German women to have. For these German, “Aryan”, women, it was hard to look toward any future other

5 “Deutsch sein — heißt stark sein. Rede der Reichsfrauenführerin Gertrud Scholtz-Klink zum Jahresbeginn,” N.S. Frauen-Warte 4 (1936): 501-502.

6 Elizabeth Wiskemann, “Women’s Changing Role in Nazi Germany,” The New York Times. Sept. 2, 1934.

than that of motherhood because of all the political, social, and cultural changes being implemented. The article offers, "If with its arrival the average German woman evinced a curiosity about Nationalist Socialism's attitude toward her role in the new scheme of things, that curiosity was speedily gratified [...]. In short, German women were soon made to understand that the new State was peradventure with a vengeance a man's state and that her contribution to the glories of the Third Reich were confined to the matrimony, maternity and the household."⁷ This author describes for us how not only were women accepting this role of motherhood without protest, especially in contrast to the more freedom filled past of the Weimar Republic, but these women were now granted no room to disagree with these ideals. However, it was easier for the American audience to criticize these Nazi ideals of motherhood when the prosperous and culturally significant 1940's were just around the corner.

Now that women had been excluded from politics and had policies implemented on the behalf of their children-fueled futures, the marriageable women of the Nazi state could now be brought forward for the ultimate goal of motherhood. Following along with the above paragraph, it is clear that women in the Nazi state were destined to be mothers and should be proud to accept their position of holding the future of the Volk in their hands, or in this case their wombs,. Because this "destiny" changed the way women were perceived throughout Germany, it made the leaders of the Third Reich able to divert attention away from their sinister war aspirations. Instead, the emphasis on racial purification and expansion had become more concrete on the home front.⁸ Before a woman could become a mother, she must

7 "German Women Accept New Role: few Voices Raised in Protest Against Regulations to the Household Duties." *The New York Times*. July 07, 1935.

8 Renate Bridenthal, Anita Grossmann, and Marion Kaplan, *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984.) 41.

first become a bride and provide a comfortable and loving home for her husband. The way Americans saw this aspect of Nazi brides is outlined in *The New York Times* slightly later on as the war was being waged by the hands of the German military. This article pertains to the opinions of the Librarian of Congress, Archibald MacLeish. Written in 1942, the author writes, "The Nazi state, described in terms of women's lives,' he said, 'is a state in other worlds, which first women are, first, bearers of children and, thereafter, providers of unskilled routine labor; a state in which women are obliged to undertake the duty of motherhood without the honor which, in every other country of the earth, accompanies that duty; a state in which women are taught the holy obligation of the wife without exercising the right of personal choice, the right of the disposition of their persons, which alone makes wifehood holy.'"⁹ This article is a perfect example of being able to discover that popular American attitudes toward Nazi motherhood and matrimony were becoming even more widespread and increasingly negative.

In following with the idea of marriageable women, the Nationalist Socialists placed heavy importance upon marriage between an Aryan man and an Aryan woman who were both physically fit, educated in their prospective spheres, and able to produce children for the state. Marriage with a strapping young man, who was preferably part of the ever-expanding Wehrmacht, was the highly exalted first step for women to uphold. Traditional family values of unity and strength were regarded in this time as the best possible way for economic and social success. In a *New York Times* article in 1934, the author compares the advancements of ideas for wives to be "free" in other countries and wives in Nazi Germany being held back, or rather pushed back into the kitchen. The author states, "There seems¹⁰ to

9 "Calls Nazi Women 'Brides of State': MacLeish Tells Smith Seniors Foe Makes Patriotic Virtue of Honorless Motherhood." *The New York Times*. June 08, 1942.

10 Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Society*. (USA: Harper & Roe Publishers, Inc.

be some doubt in the minds of other people besides Herr Hitler as to whether the sphere in to which woman moved after that, and is still moving, was actually the one to which her great Creator assigned her. But there is no possible doubt that it is enlarged.”¹¹ Once again, these negative American attitudes were not only geared toward Nazi political and militaristic ventures, but also toward the Draconian ideology of their own women being reduced to marriage material and reproductive machines.

As a wife and a mother, perfecting domesticity was the most important way a woman could achieve the Nationalist Socialist goal of providing for her country. Holding dear to this idea, it is important to note the clever, alliterative saying the Nationalist Socialists came up for women to aspire to; *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*.¹² In English, this translates to, “Children, Kitchen, Church.” These three aspects were what women were supposed to take the most seriously and to follow the rules thereof. To further explain the American viewpoint of *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*, New York Times journalist Otto D. Tolischus writes, “Thus patriotism, economics, and the self-interest of the male combine to drive women back to the three ‘K’s’ – *Kinder, Küche, and Kirche*, meaning children, kitchen, and church. The German woman never objected to identifying with the three ‘K’s’; it was her pride that she was the *hasufrau par excellence*. If anything, the women are more ardently for this part of the Nazi program than men.”¹³ The almost mocking sense of the report offered from Mr. Tolischus here is not only drawing on the backwards view of German women from the

1975.)

11 Mildred Adams, “Woman’s Future: Two Divergent Paths: Pushed Back Into the Kitchen in Nazi Germany, She Wins New Freedom in Other Countries.” *The New York Times* Mar. 18, 1934.

12 Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, 201.

13 Otto D. Tolischus, “Woman’s Place in the ‘Manly’ Nazi State: The Third Reich Exalts the ‘Womanly Woman’ as a Mother, Wife, and Guardian of Germanic Ideas and Culture.” *New York Times* Sept. 10, 1933.

Nationalist Socialists, he is also pointing to the fact that these women are part of a larger endgame, almost as if they were being used as pawns for the upcoming brutal war.

Throughout the extensive amount of research regarding women in Nazi Germany, the one inescapable theme was always the way motherhood was treated as the most important aspect for the Aryan takeover of Europe. That point could not have been made any clearer through the abundance of primary documents dealing exclusively with this issue. Without a doubt, the one way for a race to expand is through procreation. The Nazi leaders, Adolf Hitler in particular, knew that this form of pseudo-science and rationale was unmistakably logical for racial purification. If procreation of new Aryan soldiers was the one-way that Germany could become the greatest nation, then the women of Nazi Germany were the key to opening the door of success. German women, already lived in a world where they were seen as the weaker sex, could easily be molded and indoctrinated into becoming the wives and mothers Hitler always envisioned for his 1,000 year Reich. One term particularly exemplifies this Nazi motherhood movement: "population war". This term is further explained in an article from The New York Times written in 1940, towards the breakout of total war, this article states that; "Besides being a military war, a war of nerves, an economic war and several other kinds of war, this war is first and foremost a war of populations in which the Germans have enlisted their greater biological potency against the West, while at the same time diminishing, as an indirect result, their military and economic measures against the greater fecundity of the Slavs who are crowded against the German 'Lebensraum' [living space.]"¹⁴

The women of Nazi Germany were being urged to keep birth rates rising even in the face of complete and total war coming soon

¹⁴ Otto D. Tolischus, "Germany Waging 'Population War': 'More People, More Land' is Now Slogan, Replacing Old Cry for 'Living Space.'" The New York Times. Jan. 14, 1940.

not just from The Red Army, but from the Western Allies as well. Although Germany had encountered much military success up to this point, and the number of dying soldiers would not reach its peak for another year, with the invasion of the Soviet Union, the future of the Reich was almost entirely up to the women of Germany to keep the Aryan race expanding. The point of military expansion and invasion was so these soon to be perfect Aryan citizens could have places to live and subsequently, allow the power of the Third Reich to be unmatched by the entirety of the world.¹⁵ However, the question was still asked by all: Where is the place for the women in this male run Nazi state? This question was answered by previously mentioned New York Times article by Otto D. Tolischus, in 1933. Tolischus writes, "For this state and race, Nazism demands the manly man and the womanly woman- the manly man as fighter and provider, and the womanly woman as mother, nurse and guardian of the domestic fireside. Nazism scorns the effeminate man as much as the boyish-looking, neuter-minded, self-centered woman. [...] In Nazi ideology, woman becomes synonymous with mother rather than wife, and motherhood replaces sex appeal as woman's greatest attraction. Womanhood changes from a biological condition into a moral mission."¹⁶

In conclusion, Nationalist Socialist Party used their rising power to put women at the forefront of the core Nazi ideology of race and space. These leaders essentially made women the social and biological weapons in which they believed would help them win the war of racial superiority. This attempt at racial purification could not have been achieved had there not been cooperation from the women themselves and continuing policies to further implement their Aryan status within the world. Even more notable is the way the American audience reacted to the Nazi regime's view of woman as mother and mother only. By

15 Doris Bergen, *War & Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 150.

16 Tolischus, "Woman's Place in the 'Manly' Nazi State."

means of exclusion in politics, creation of specialized clubs, importance on pure and fit marriage, and an ultimate goal of motherhood, the Nationalist Socialist state of Germany in the 1930's to early 1940's was able to successfully convince the people, especially women, that the womb would end up being the most deadly weapon of all.

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