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A Lost Generation of Women: The Female Perpetrators that Propelled the Nazi Regime*

Claire Murphy

Substantial research efforts and scholarly discourse has been conducted to investigate the lasting repercussions of what is historically considered one of the world's worst genocides - the Holocaust. While information exists pertaining to the perpetrators of these horrific crimes, prior examinations have largely been centered around the male aggressor. Gendered connotations of genocidal violence seem to reinforce the narrative that women were not a part of these efforts. However, recent explorations into the past reveal that German women were directly involved in instances of "mass murder," and assisted in the Nazi party's attempt to exterminate an entire population of innocent civilians. While these women perhaps comprised "a minority of the perpetrators involved," their participation ultimately fueled the initial success of the party, simultaneously defying previous conceptions of both femininity and gender.¹ Their contributions remain essential in understanding the cultural, social, and political standards at the time, in addition to discerning how a nation could justify an attempted annihilation of a community.² Historical documentation provides reference to a handful of German women who were remembered for their participation in the Holocaust, but the majority of female perpetrators were not members of the elite

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¹ Elissa Bemporad, Joyce W. Warren, and Wendy Lower, "German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East," in *Women and Genocide: Survivors, Victims, Perpetrators* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), pp. 111-130.

² Wendy Lower, "Introduction," in *Hitler's Furies* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2013), p. 4.

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class. Instead, they composed “ordinary” positions within the regime, continuously carrying out atrocities, all the while defying the masculine-oriented ideology of the party. Participation supplied these women with a sense of purpose, identity, and unification against a common enemy. These elements provide reasoning as to why female perpetrators could ultimately justify committing such unimaginable genocidal crimes.

Prior to their transition into the “killing fields” of Germany during World War II, German women were primarily confined to the constrictions of National Socialism, the accepted political ideology of Nazi party.³ This nationalist framework, although advertised by authority figures as being inclusive and politically compelling, placed women in “subservient roles.” Their primary purpose was to birth Aryan children and become “breeders for the Nazi war machine.”⁴ Party leaders argued that these positions, while inferior, gave women a chance to play a crucial role within the state, acting as “defenders of the homeland,” all while serving their country’s national agenda.⁵ Hitler’s propagation of the medieval conception of women needing to embody the maxim of *‘Kinder, Küche und Kirche (‘children, kitchen and church)’* was widely accepted at the time, presumably because promotion of these discriminatory roles was framed through the perception that they were respectable, important, and highly valued positions.⁶ Under this conception, women were encouraged to find empowerment in their duties to the regime, with some even misled to believe that if they completed their tasks with dignity and acceptance, they would later be welcomed into various party organizations and other levels of the public sphere as an “ultimate

³ Wendy Adele-Marie, “Introduction,” in *Women as Nazis: Female Perpetrators of the Holocaust* (Independently Published, 2019), pp. 1-9.

⁴ Wendy Adele-Marie, “Why National Socialism Appealed to Women,” in *Women as Nazis: Female Perpetrators of the Holocaust* (Independently Published, 2019), p. 17

⁵ *Ibid.*, 16

⁶ Paul Roland, “Hitler’s Women,” in *Nazi Women: The Attraction of Evil* (London, U.K.: Arcturus Publishing, Ltd, 2016), pp. 9-10.

avocation of personal sacrifice for Hitler.”⁷ The term *Volksgemeinschaft* (the people’s community) was originally created with the intention to incentivize women to accept their second-class citizenship and proclaim the benefits of fulfilling their roles as wives, mothers and primary caregivers. As Hitler declared to an audience of almost 700,000 during a Nuremberg Party Rally in 1934:

What man offers in heroism on the field of battle, women equals with unending perseverance and sacrifice, with unending pain and suffering. Every child she brings into the world is a battle, a battle she wages for the existence of her people, for the National Socialist...Volksgemeinschaft was established...because millions of women became our most loyal, fanatical fellow combatants.⁸

Astonishingly, females continued to support the movement and its insinuated oppression of women.⁹ Despite a repressive and totalitarian regime, National Socialism appealed to millions of German women. They showcased their support through ongoing attendance at Nazi rallies and their adoption of Nazi-oriented propaganda.¹⁰ Defying both gender and historical expectations, these women embraced backward-looking policy changes. When the Nazi party set out to abolish the female vote in 1933 (originally awarded in January 1919), women rejected the “oppressive male” as their primary enemy. Instead, they championed Nazi agendas, urging that “the Jew, the asocial, the Bolshevik, and the feminist”

⁷ Adele-Marie, “Why National Socialism Appealed to Women,” p. 16

⁸ Adolf Hitler, “Nuremberg Rally,” *Nuremberg Rally* (September 6, 1934).

⁹ Bemporad, et al, “German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East,” p. 114.

¹⁰ Adele-Marie, “Why National Socialism Appealed to Women,” p. 16

were the true enemies of the state, propelling the advancement of these ideologies within the country.¹¹

For many scholars, the question remains as to why German women would unquestionably submit themselves to Nazi ideology and later become complicit and responsible for the genocidal violence that occurred during the Holocaust. As evident in the primary testimony of Ellen Frey, a German woman who grew up during Nazi rule, patriotism played a substantial role in the acceptance of racial prejudice. “It was sort of a slogan of the Nazis. ‘The German woman brings children into the world,’” she said in an interview. “Hitler understood how to fascinate women. I was born in 1915 and I was *very* patriotic. In our generation there is nothing going on with heroes and nothing going on that one can really stand up for. And then came Hitler.”¹² Additional motivations are revealed in the entries submitted to the Columbia University essay contest on the subject, “Why I Became a Nazi,” organized by sociologist Theodore Abel in 1936. Of the 581 evaluated entries, the dominant theme articulated was the “desire to be part of an ethnic community spirit, the compulsion to conform, and the interest in finding like-minded individuals or risk being outcast from a popular movement.”¹³ In these findings, Abel also concluded that twenty three percent of the women’s submissions addressed a “lightened patriotism and a distrust of foreigners as their prime motivation,” for participating in genocidal campaigns. All essays spoke of traumatization and great loss following in the wake of World War I, in addition to articulating personal losses (such as the death of a father, brother or son). In this way, dedicating oneself to a political regime as publicized as the Nazi party, provided a sense of belonging, kinship, and

¹¹ Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2013, p. 24

¹² Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich, *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich*, February 1, 1993, pp. 173-174.

¹³ Paul Roland, “Women in the Fatherland,” in *Nazi Women: The Attraction of Evil* (London, U.K.: Arcturus Publishing, Ltd, 2016), p. 79.

community. Abel's findings suggest that through this commitment, "the Party became their substitute family and the Führer their father figure."¹⁴

Given their steadfast and devote faithfulness to the Nazi dictatorship, when it came time for women to join the movement through more regulated positions, they did. Despite previous Nazi ideologies denouncing female involvement and discouraging active participation on the warfront, women showed up in unprecedented numbers to show their support, in some cases upholding positions that involved carrying out death orders and other forms of genocidal killing.¹⁵ Although domesticity was publicly endorsed as the primary sphere for women to exercise their support, the outpouring of male populations onto the battlefield as the war progressed resulted in women joining the workforce, even on initially small scales.¹⁶ By the early 1940s "hundreds of thousands of young single women" were drafted "like soldiers" into various military positions within the regime, enduring considerable amounts of "physical and ideological training" to solidify their places as nurses, secretaries, auxiliaries, camp/prison guards, and factory workers.¹⁷ These positions awarded women with a level of political status they had never previously been allowed to acquire. Subsequently, many felt empowered and invigorated by their improved social standing. A formal job brought with it the chance of an income, an opportunity for career advancement, greater social mobility, and ultimately a better life. The promise of breaking the gender barriers that historically prohibited female advancement within the workforce appealed to many German women and was therefore almost impossible to resist.¹⁸

Female enthusiasm surrounding their involvement in the Party can be seen in numerous primary source accounts. The

¹⁴ Ibid., 80.

¹⁵ Bemporad, et al, "German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East."

¹⁶ Adele-Marie, "Why National Socialism Appealed to Women," p. 23.

¹⁷ Bemporad, et al, "German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East," p. 115.

¹⁸ Adele-Marie, "Why National Socialism Appealed to Women," p. 31.

published letters of a Red Cross nurse in Germany, recently evaluated by German historian, Marita Krauss, provides evidence to the assertion that these roles, although lacking in formal recognition, encouraged patriotism and liberation. Brigitte Penkert expresses in her journal writings that, “training as a nurse and taking an oath to the Führer as a member of the German Red Cross,” provided her with a “manly” sense of honor. As Krauss analyzes, Penkert “enthused over the chance to stand guard just like a man with a weapon in her hand,” as it supplied her with a brief moment of equality or as “in the Nazi ideology of racial unity, a comradeship of Aryan men and women.”¹⁹ Her position allowed her to leave an unfulfilling marriage and life at home to feel accepted and appreciated as a member of the Führer. Other accounts demonstrate similar feelings of nationalism and support. Irmgard Reichenau, the primary editor of *Deutsche Frauen an Adolf Hitler (German Women to Adolf Hitler)*, a collection of open letters produced by Nazi women, writes about her devotion to the country in an effort to advance the female position within the Third Reich. “Our love for Germany gives us the right and makes it our duty to say below a few things that German women have to say to the German man,” she writes. “A Volksgemeinschaft [community] of Germanic blood cannot in the long run be led and controlled only by men. The three generations now living are directed by the will of the creator to the third stage: to the social order of the two-unified...”²⁰ If the Nazi party was to be successful, Reichenau argued, Germany needed sizable contributions from female supporters. These women, estimated to total around 500,000, flocked to join the Eastern Campaign. While still being considered the “gentler sex,” they participated in numerous acts of genocidal

¹⁹ Brigitte Penkert and Wendy Lower, “Letter from German Red Cross Nurse in German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East,” in *Women and Genocide: Survivors, Victims, and Perpetrators*, trans. Marita Krauss (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), p. 115.

²⁰ Irmgard Reichenau (Nuremberg, Germany, n.d.).

violence through their supportive roles, working to fulfill Hitler's mission of the Final Solution.²¹

One of the most common positions for women to uphold within Nazi Germany was that of a secretary or clerical worker. Despite little attention paid to these duties (as they remained outside of the formal camp system), the positions were vital to the initial success of the Party. Thousands of German women took on these administrative roles, in some cases assigned to type up specific orders for "mobile killing units," like the *Einsatzgruppen*.²² These positions were often exploited by high-ranking bureaucratic party members, with employees having to devote a substantial number of hours to their work and being paid little in return. Still, females increasingly sought out these positions, and by the late 1930s, the number of women occupying these roles tripled.²³ Long-standing gender stereotypes however allowed for many to be taken advantage of and used as cheap labor sources. If a woman proved her devotion and loyalty to the regime through increased hours and little protest, she had the ability to advance within her placement, working for station headquarters like Nazi leader, Heinrich Himmler's, *Einsatzgruppe A*. A position of this stature required women to produce "thousands of pages of reports and orders on mass shootings," in addition to typing out and discharging death orders to concentration camps and assisting with the distribution of murder tallies to report back to Nazi bases like the Berlin headquarters.²⁴ Traudl Junge, one of Hitler's principal secretaries, later recalled her experiences in her memoir, *Until the Final Hour: Hitler's Last Secretary*. The book is an attempt by Junge to reconcile her actions and complicity in genocidal violence:

²¹ Bemporad, et al, "German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East," pp. 116-117.

²² Ibid, p. 117.

²³ Wendy Lower, "The East Needs You," in *Hitler's Furies* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2013), p. 53.

²⁴ Bemporad, et al, "German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East," p. 117.

I was Hitler's secretary for two and a half years... At this period we were all looking to the future and trying - with remarkable success, incidentally - to repress and play down our past experiences. I set about writing my memoirs objectively.. I read my manuscript again several decades later. I was horrified by my uncritical failure to distance myself from my subject at the time, and ashamed of it. How could I have been so naive and unthinking?²⁵

Junge's expressions reflect an unpopular theme among female perpetrators in the post-genocidal period following the war. Notable court documents and public testimonies pertaining to the Nazi perpetrators in Galicia, suggest that many were unremorseful about their involvement in the Holocaust. In the 1949 trial of a married couple who shot and killed Jewish civilians on their SS agricultural estate, the wife defended her involvement in the genocide, claiming it awarded her with gender allowances and political acknowledgement she could have never dreamed of.²⁶ Although Junge articulated repentance and shame in her memoir, historical scholars have since argued that this was in relation to her personal effort to be exonerated by the de-Nazification court and avoid potential criminal charges. Her ignorance, they assert, was both calculated and deliberate. She was not, as she later argued, "unaware of the nature of the regime she served or its policies towards those it considered 'undesirables' and enemies of the state."²⁷

German women were also employed as camp/prison SS guards during the war, although these positions were much more

²⁵ Traudl Junge and Müller Melissa, "Introduction," in *Until the Final Hour: Hitler's Last Secretary* (New York, NY: Arcade Publishing, 2004), pp. 1-2.

²⁶ Wendy Lower, "Male and Female Holocaust Perpetrators and the East German Approach to Justice, 1949-1963," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 24, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): pp. 56-84, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcq003>.

²⁷ Paul Roland, "The Gentle Sex?," in *Nazi Women: The Attraction of Evil* (London, U.K.: Arcturus Publishing, Ltd, 2016), p. 210.

infrequent, as they denoted a social and political status that was primarily reserved for men. Historical estimates determine that there were upwards of 5,000 German women employed as female guards by the end of the war and their role provided compensations that were only present through positions of this nature, such as educational training, a decent salary, housing, and community involvement.²⁸ These forms of employment offered many benefits, but they came at a price. Training and guard instruction was oftentimes long and invasive for female guards. Most women additionally had little control over their hours or pay. The required labor was repeatedly physically grueling and personal recognition was only awarded by members of authority to women who exercised increased “brutality” in their actions towards prisoners.²⁹ As intrusive as it was, employment in these camps was a choice - one many German women decided to make. If hired as an SS guard, it was impossible to take no notice of the barbarity and violence that occurred at these “concentration and extermination camps.” Similar to the men employed by the SS, several women agreed that the “camp structure was a necessary part of the National Socialist policy,” and that “in order for Germany to survive, all perceived enemies of the state, especially the Jews, had to be destroyed.”³⁰ Records indicate that numerous amounts of public humiliation, beating, and other forms of cruelty were exercised by female guards at the expense of many prisoners. This was especially true at Ravensbrück, the first and only death camp built in 1938, designed and reserved entirely for women.³¹

Johanna Langefeld, a former head guard at the Ravensbrück camp, was popularly known for her brutality towards female prisoners. As one former Ravensbrück prisoner recalled in 1957,

²⁸ Wendy Adele-Marie, “Die Schutzstaffel, The SS,” in *Women as Nazis: Female Perpetrators of the Holocaust* (Independently Published, 2019), p. 43.

²⁹ Ibid, 42.

³⁰ Ibid, 41.

³¹ Sarah Helm, *Ravensbrück: Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2016).

Langefeld resembled the qualities of a “steel-hardened man.” Despite having no official title, badge, or rank within the SS system, Langefeld “believed she could run a women’s concentration camp better than any man” in the hopes of restoring a sense of patriotism and order to the Third Reich. Although the former prisoner expressed that Langefeld “would pray to God for strength to stop the evil happening,” her cultural attitude resembled the stance of the party in her abhorrence towards Jews. “If a Jewish woman came into her office,” she expressed, “her face would fill with hatred...”³² Many female guards, like Emma Zimmer, demonstrated a sense of enjoyment in their authoritative stature, notably in the power and influence it awarded them. Trained in the “use of straightjackets and water dousing,” Zimmer often referred to prisoners as “bitches” and “dirty cows” who needed to be put into their place. She utilized her “loose wrist” in the form of frequent acts of corporal punishment. “She liked to slap,” one prisoner wrote, “walked up and down the ranks carrying a large document file, with which she would beat inmates about the head at the slightest movement of sound...she lashed out with her jackboots too.”³³ These accounts work to challenge previous gender conceptions held at the time. Women were not - as they were so often understood to be - weak or ignorant participants. Their complicity, or rather direct involvement in instances of genocidal violence and murder was *a choice* on their part, although likely the product of years’ worth of gender discrimination and subordination. With the allure of equality that these kinds of positions could potentially provide, German women found it almost impossible to resist, astonishingly even when it required partaking in intended extermination.³⁴

Of all the forms of employment that women could uphold as part of the Nazi war effort, the largest involvement came from staffed nursing positions. Through this role, German women were

³² Helm, *Ravensbrück*, pp.3-4.

³³ *Ibid.*, 27

³⁴ Helm, p 27.

responsible for many deaths, as members of the Third Reich staffed women with significant responsibilities in the Nazi euthanasia campaign.³⁵ An estimated 200,000 deaths occurred in Nazi controlled “asylums, hospitals, and other medical factories.” German women were accountable for “assisting in racial screening and selection, mass sterilization, starvation, gassing, and lethal injections of those deemed ‘unworthy of life.’”³⁶ Counselled in discriminatory “racial hygiene and hereditary disease” education, nurses were in charge of evaluating prisoners for potential physical and mental handicaps, leading them into asylums and gas chambers, and even “administering” the lethal injections to end their life.³⁷ After the killing concluded, nurses were often tasked with typing up the “death notices” to be processed by campaign leaders and monitoring the shipment of millions of pounds of ashes to be dumped overseas. Upon hiring, it was required that female employees took an oath of secrecy in relation the Führer’s “mercy killing” program, and some were sent on to work at the “Osteinsatz with the Organization Todt” in 1942, a government-controlled agency responsible for organizing medical experiments for prisoners of war.³⁸

Nazi leaders propagated the importance of nursing positions, claiming they aided the “fighting power of the German military” to help eradicate Jews and simultaneously improve the morale, attitude, and health of the soldier. In these ways, German women felt that their involvement was essential to the success of the movement. The ability to kill or commit acts of genocide however, was “directed less by their professional training than by simple

³⁵ Bemporad, et al, “German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East,” p. 117.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2013, p. 43.

³⁸ Elizabeth Roberts Baer, Myrna Goldenberg, and Susan Benedict, “Caring While Killing: Nurses in the 'Euthanasia Centers',” in *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, vol. 1 (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2003), pp. 59-79.

opportunity, individual character, and proximity to power.”³⁹ Nurses had the ability to control how evil or sadistic they wished to be towards their patients. As past historical documentation suggests, violence was a prominent feature exercised by female perpetrators. Women held the capacity to commit inhumane acts of murder on their own volition, and they often chose to comply with a system of rule that was both dehumanizing and abominable in nature.⁴⁰

The continued denial and suppression of involvement by female perpetrators following the war furthers the argument against women’s lack of awareness in relation to genocidal violence. Unsurprisingly, women have been accused and tried for their participation in the Holocaust on a miniscule level in comparison to male perpetrators. During the infamous 1945-46 Nuremberg Trials, a meager 200 defendants were tried, 161 of whom were convicted. None of the “serious criminals” accused were women. Of the twelve subsequent trials conducted by the Allied Forces following World War II, only “two women figure among the hundreds accused” in trials relating to medical roles, agencies, and other “purification” programs.⁴¹ The women that were convicted for their involvement primarily reflected positions of political power and status, a standing that little to none of the average female perpetrator obtained within the Nazi party. Gender stereotypes and attitudes inflated these post-war trial results, with public testimonies aimed at reinforcing the narrative that women were naive to explicit violence given their sex, and following this argument, would be incapable of facilitating mass murder on a scale as large as the Holocaust. Erna Petri, one of the few female perpetrators accused and convicted for genocidal participation and intent, defied public understanding in relation to a woman’s

³⁹ Lower, “The East Needs You,” p. 52.

⁴⁰ Bemporad, et al, “German Women and the Holocaust in the Nazi East,” pp. 118-119.

⁴¹ Annette Wieviorka, “Women and the Post-War Nazi Trials,” trans. Jeanne Armstrong, *Clio: Women, Gender, History* 2, no. 39 (April 10, 2015): pp. 146-151, <https://doi.org/10.4000/cliowgh.527>.

capacity to commit acts of great brutality in her 1961 trial. During her interrogation by the East German court, Petri admitted to shooting and killing “6 Jewish children with (her) own hands.” In defense of her actions, Petri stated:

I was only 23 years olds, still young and inexperienced. I lived only among men, who were in the SS and carried out shootings of Jewish persons. I seldom had contact with other women, so in the course of time I became more hardened. Not wanting to stand behind the SS men, I wanted to show them that I, as a woman, could conduct myself like a man. So I shot 4 Jews and 6 Jewish children. I wanted to prove myself to the men.⁴²

These articulations speak to the commonly experienced desire for women at this time to be valued as equal in relation to their male peers. The lack of remorse, guilt, or regret expressed by Petri symbolizes the prominence and respect towards a masculinized identity in Nazi politics and nationalism. Women who demonstrated attitudes and beliefs in line with the accepted characteristics of the party were more likely to acquire positions within the regime, even if they were of a lower status. Having their participation valued and recognized (oftentimes for the first time in their lives) by the political elite, female perpetrators took gratification in this new sense of belonging. The belief that their contributions mattered and played a role in catapulting the Third Reich’s success, led to an unconscionable justification by women to commit great acts of violence and co-operate in assisting one of the most lethal and devastating genocides in all of history.

Previous discourses and historical examinations of Nazi Germany have largely ignored the role of female perpetrators during World War II. These German women's contributions,

⁴²“Interrogation of Erna Petri,” n.d..

involvement, and participation, however, remain essential in understanding the ways in which gender and nationhood can reinforce complicity and violence during a genocide. Although originally told to remain at the home front and rejoice in a domestic lifestyle, German women increasingly entered into more formal positions within the Nazi regime as the war progressed. These roles awarded them with new forms of responsibility and acknowledgment they had never before experienced. Working primarily as secretaries, nurses, and SS prison guards, German women accelerated the progress of the party, fulfilling Hitler's wishes of exterminating a population in the hopes of creating a better and more civilized Aryan race. Their genocidal involvement defies previous understandings about femininity and womanhood, demonstrating the power that community and identity have when it comes to justifying murder. Scholars and historians have often rejected categorizing women as "violent criminals," as it connotes a perception that seems fabricated and unprovable. However, as primary evidence from the period suggests, women *are just as capable as men* at committing unspeakable acts of violence. To remove their contributions from history not only obscures the truth, but enables misconceptions about gender, complicity, and the nature of genocide.