MOTHERS IN THE FATHERLAND

Women, the Family and Nazi Politics

Claudia Koonz

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
WOMEN'S HISTORY

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What is past is not dead; it is not even past. We cut ourselves off from it; we preferred to be strangers.

—Christa Wolf, *Model Childhood*

For my parents,
Oliver W. and Edna Kingston Koonz

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PREFACE

As I waited for Gertrud Scholtz-Klink to walk through the door of a cluttered editorial office in the prosperous suburb of a quaint German university town, I tried to imagine how she might have changed in the forty years since I had lost her trail in the archives. In the early 1940s, American historian Mary Beard had been awestruck at the power of this woman, whom she had described as "spectacular and utterly ruthless."

> By 1941 she [Gertrud Scholtz-Klink] was governing some thirty million German women and tightening her grip on some twenty million other women in lands occupied by German troops. The dictatorial authority of this "Lady *Führer über Alles*" was vividly described by Peter Engelmann. . . . "Frau Klink," wrote Engelmann, "rules the lives of women in all things. She tells them how many children they must have, and when; what they shall wear, what they shall cook and how. What they shall say, laughing to their husbands and sons marching to war. How they shall behave, smiling, when their men are killed. Here is the responsibility for the home spirit, the core of national morale."[1]

She had impressed William Shirer, on the other hand, as "particularly obnoxious and vapid."[2] This woman was about to walk through the door, and I wondered again what I would say, what I might learn. What had brought me here?

Curiosity? Of course. But I also felt a sleuthlike need to follow up on every clue related to the role of women in Nazi Germany. I had already gathered evidence from books and archives on women who embraced Nazism and joined the Party, on Catholics and Protestants who expressed reservations but welcomed the arrival of an authoritarian state in 1933, on women who opposed Hitler, and finally on Jewish women who defended themselves against incremental and ultimately lethal danger. This was not, as my friends and colleagues were quick to point out, "happy history."

"How," my friends asked, "can you live with such a depressing topic?" Like all historians, I had a ready-made response. " 'Those who don't

know their history are condemned to repeat it.' " Was that a feeble excuse? Americans today see no swastikas on their political horizons. Uniformed, goose-stepping militarism surely died out after the advent of missiles and guerrillas. Still, underneath the unique and dated style of Nazism lurked a more universal appeal—the longing to return to simpler times, to restore lost values, to join a moral crusade. What needs drove those millions of "good Germans" willingly into dictatorship, war, and genocide? Did those needs exist in other nations at other times? Could what Susan Sontag has called "the drama of the leader and the chorus" continue to play a role after the demise of the fascist hero?[3] During the Great Depression, Germans rallied to one-man-one-party rule, uniforms, flags and rifles, mass rallies, racial hatred, and appeals to national glory. What would happen in other countries if small businessmen, housewives, artisans, white-collar workers, and students felt betrayed by an alien political establishment, a fraying welfare net, and chronic economic dislocations?

I thought back on the years I had spent in Germany during the late 1950s and early 1960s—to innumerable hitchhiking conversations, when I stumbled onto my own interview format with my standard opener, "What wonderful highways you have here."

"You like our autobahn?"

"Oh, yes, it seems very fast, and scenic, too."

"You would never guess who built it." I never once gave into the temptation to say, "You bet I would!"

And we would slide into conversation about the glorious 1930s, when a dynamic leader pulled his nation out of the Depression (more successfully than "your" Roosevelt) and inspired people with a new idealism. I don't know if a random sample of Germans stopped to pick up foreign hitchhikers. I asked why they gave rides to students, and they invariably told me that they had begun the practice during the war years, when sharing seemed more important than privacy. After the war in the days before Eurail passes, kindly European drivers routinely gave students not only lifts to the next town but allowed them an intimate glimpse into their values and culture. In my case, hundreds of Germans shared with me their memories of a Nazism without genocide, racism, or war. They recalled a social world of close families, sports activities and vacations, a strong community spirit, high moral standards, and economic security. Men and women looked back with fondness, sad only about the war—that is, the defeat, not the brilliant military victories before the Battle of Stalingrad. Since visions of Hitler as evil incarnate had colored my childhood, I wondered that people would be so open in their defense of the Nazi state. Especially I asked the women with whom I spoke how they

had felt about so militaristic a regime. "Politics, police, the army—all those bad things—they were men's concerns," they answered. History recorded the "bad things"; memory preserved a benign face of fascism.

Fifteen years later I returned to the question of women's participation in the Third Reich and realized that I would have to find the documents because so little had been published about women. The endeavor led me to search for memos, orders, letters, and articles, by and about one Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, the chief of the Women's Bureau under Hitler. Never had it occurred to me that one day she would emerge from the historical shadows, take on human form and speak. Political scientists meet their subjects; but normally historians study dead leaders. One day in 1980 I noticed Scholtz-Klink's book, *The Woman in the Third Reich*, in a feminist bookstore in Berlin, and picked it up. Upon leafing through it, it became clear the the contents were speeches and articles written by Scholtz-Klink and her staff during the 1930s. The dust jacket announced the collection as "a pioneering work of supreme importance" and a testimonial to Scholtz-Klink's "extraordinary achievements as well as great suffering during fateful bitter times." The publicity promises that Scholtz-Klink's writings will demonstrate how women "came naturally to form the 'biological middle point' " of a new society, driven by "nationalist and racial powers. . . . Without the courage, power and steadfastness of women, girls, and mothers in the Third Reich, the Germany of today would be unthinkable." Such a book, I thought to myself, in a women's bookstore. Although its essays carried a deeply anti-feminist message, the bookstore stocked it because its author was female. Richard Evans' excellent history of German feminism, by contrast, had been ruled out because its author was male. Biology still counted more than opinion in Berlin. My ideological doubts subsided, however, as the historian in me realized that Scholtz-Klink might still be alive. Not really expecting a reply, I wrote a polite note to the publisher and forgot about it. She would of course refuse my request to speak with her, but then I could include a footnote saying I had tried.

One day as I returned from a research trip, I found a letter addressed in a familiar hand. The postmark, Tübingen, meant nothing to me; I knew no one who lived there. Then I felt a chill travel up my spine. How many times had I seen that regular, graceful hand at the end of letters and documents. *"Sehr geehrte Frau Dr. Koonz,"* the letter began. I had always met my subjects through their records; now a ghost rose out of the archival mist and addressed me. The leader of millions of Nazi women under Hitler had decided to talk to me. What did she want? What did I want from her?

When I embarked on this research project, the paradox of the topic

riveted my attention. In the Nazi state, women had received the opportunity to create the largest women's organization in history, with the blessings of the blatantly male-chauvinist Nazi Party. Here was the nineteenth-century feminists' vision of the future in nightmare form. The earliest crusaders for women's rights had believed passionately in their distinct female nature and concluded that their political participation and legal equality would elevate the level of public debate, redirect the government toward more humane concerns, and calm male leaders' warlike predisposition. While fighting for equality, women defended their difference, vowing never to become "masculinized." The dream lived on even after war, revolution, and Depression had sapped the nation's idealism. As "man-made" institutions pitted worker against capitalist, socialist against nationalist, rich against poor, a nostalgia for the natural grew.

The myth about a past that never was increased in beauty as it became more remote from modern society. At the heart of this vision lay a dream of a strong man and a gentle woman, cooperating under the stern guidance of an orderly state. The image did not die with the German surrender in 1945, but lives on in memory. Often it finds brilliant artistic expression, as for example in Edgar Reitz's fifteen and a half hour film *Heimat*, which recreates a Nazi past unfiltered by ethical questions and unmarred by unpleasant references to victims or violence. National Socialism, as a movement before 1933, a state for twelve years thereafter, and a memory since 1945, embodies the myth of an orderly world dominated by men and a gentle world of love preserved by women. Hundreds of scholars had investigated the etiology of the regime that extended from the SA and SS at the grassroots to the desk murders in Berlin. But what about the women? That question brought me to Tübingen.

The woman who bore the major responsibility for creating a separate female sphere in Nazi society was about to walk through the door. I had followed her bureaucratic maneuvers, watching her establish a mammoth organization spanning virtually all aspects of German social life. She had developed her own style of administration and cultivated an intense loyalty among her followers. Often I had stared at photographs of her modest figure surrounded by overdressed and overfed Nazi leaders. Because Scholtz-Klink's duty was to inspire other women to follow her example, she always appeared as the peahen surrounded by plumed ostentation. I recalled an American woman's account of a meeting with the Führerin.

> One meets her surrounded by Nazi flags and uniforms. Her gentle femininity is a startling contrast to the military atmosphere. She is a friendly woman in her middle thirties, blonde, blue-eyed, regular featured, slender.

> She sits in her wicker chair on her little balcony and chats with her visitor. Her complexion is so fresh and clear that she dares to do without powder or rouge. She talks, and one notices that her firm, capable hands have known hard work. . . . How does she feel about the possibility of Germany's going to war? She glances up at the swastikas and across at the black boots of the uniformed men beyond the doorway and she turns quickly away to hide the tears in her eyes. "I have sons," she says quietly. Her eyes are as sad as the eyes of so many other German mothers who know so well the German Labor Camp motto which says so plainly that sons must "fight stubbornly and die laughing."[4]

What would the Führerin say in 1981 about her massive organization that indoctrinated a generation of young women and girls to "be brave, be German, be pure"? After decades of silence, would she impart to a new generation words of guidance and contrition? From the archives I knew her as docile, self-serving, and rather noncommittal. For all her slavish devotion to the Führer, I had not encountered anti-Semitic prejudices in her orders or memos. Perhaps after so many years, she had decided to speak out to warn the world or simply to atone for her complicity.

Without really understanding why, I felt overcome with anxiety. I intended merely to listen and to record, occasionally to insert a probing question. Oral historians must remain faceless and value-free in order to capture the full truth. Still, I had never interviewed an ex-Nazi since those hitching conversations of my student days. Gazing out at the dismal garden, I wondered; my worries began to shift from the list of questions in my head to my image. Had I dressed appropriately for this encounter? What *was* the proper image for an ex-Nazi? Could I win her trust if I wore an A-line skirt (light gray), simple shirt (also light gray), hand-knit Irish cardigan (blue), sensible shoes (also blue)? Would my hair stay neat in its Germanic bun? Certainly, I thought guiltily, I had the right coloring for an "Aryan" image. These anxieties, I realized, masked my deeper forebodings. Why did I even want to win the trust of an ex-Nazi?

The door opened. A wiry, vigorous woman strode in and took my hand, smiling openly. "I'm very pleased to meet you," we both said. She, in an A-line skirt (dark green), a Black Forest hand-knit cardigan (also dark green), prim blouse (white) with a tiny brooch, and sensible shoes (brown), shook the rain from her umbrella. A hair net kept her white braids twisted neatly around her head. I had dressed so very correctly (and so instinctively), a shudder passed through me. Except for forty years of aging, Frau Scholtz-Klink looked just as she had in the photos —proud, athletic, and trim.