WOMEN IN NAZI SOCIETY

Jill Stephenson

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To my parents, Andrew and Alice McIntyre

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INTRODUCTION

The rising tide of feminism, or 'women's lib', in the 1960s and 1970s has led to a dramatic growth in interest in the position of women in society in both recent and ancient history. In the light of this, and given the continuing fascination of inter-war Germany for the general reader as well as the historian, it is perhaps remarkable that little of substance has been written about the position of women in German society in the 1920s and 1930s, although piecemeal attempts have been made in recent years to rectify this.[1] Before the Second World War, the Nazis, particularly, produced myriad pamphlets which painted an idyllic picture of their ideology in practice, of their 'liberation' of women from the degradation into which they had been plunged by the 'Weimar system'. Communists, too, in Britain and elsewhere, wrote copiously and extravagantly on the subject, claiming that the Nazis had enslaved German women, distorting the picture to fit their own rigid ideology. The net result is that relatively little is known about the actual position of women in German society in the 1920s and 1930s, although a substantial corpus of mythology exists.

The aim here therefore is to describe and discuss some aspects of the status of, and opportunities for, women in Germany in one inter-war decade, the 1930s, and in so doing to explode some of the myths. The years 1930-40 form a logical unit whose bounds are the impact of the world economic crisis on Germany and the Nazi regime's attempt to wage war with only a partial war economy, while the German army is still victorious. To have tried to cover the years of the Second World War would have introduced a disproportionate amount of material referring to a highly abnormal situation, one which the Nazis saw as an interruption of their domestic policy, but one which was necessary if this were ever to be implemented. To have drawn to a close in 1939, with the outbreak of war, would not, however, have been much more satisfactory, since trends which were apparent then, and which had manifested themselves even earlier, can be conveniently followed into the first full year of the war, and largely left there because the failure to defeat or make peace with Germany's only remaining foe, Britain, meant that the *ad hoc* arrangements made in 1939-40 for war production, and the gearing of society to a war situation on a temporary basis, would have to be transformed into a longer term system.

Within the decade 1930 to 1940, the significance of the year 1933 is inescapable; the appointment of Adolf Hitler as German Chancellor on

30 January and the rapid progress towards the creation of a one party State, effected in July 1933, had far-reaching implications for all Germans. But to have begun this book in 1933 would have been to neglect – as others have done – the vital last years of the Weimar Republic, when trends were already apparent in many aspects of economic and social, as well as political, development which would be intensified, or, more often, distorted after the *Machtübernahme* (Nazi assumption of power). The year 1933 continues to hold a magnetic attraction for Germans and for historians of Germany; to this extent, Nazi propaganda has been highly successful, since it was the Nazis themselves who first depicted 1933 as a great turning point in German history, as the year of 'the national awakening'.

Indeed, the events of 1933 heralded changes in every aspect of German life; but these were conditioned by German traditions and experience as well as by Nazi ideology. It is not, in any case, easy to gauge the significance of Nazi policies without some knowledge of what they replaced. Study of developments in the last years before the Nazi takeover, particularly from 1930, reveals that there is a strong degree of continuity in German domestic policy in the years 1930 to 1935-6. It has long been realised that 'the descent into dictatorship' began even under the Brüning Government, with resort to the use of Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution resulting in the overriding of the parliamentary system by Presidential decree, but there has been little attempt to investigate whether this trend in the political sphere is paralleled in economic and social policy.[2] One of the major themes of this work is that there was continuity in domestic policy in the first half of the 1930s, in spite of the momentous events of 1933, simply because of the cataclysmic and all-pervading effect on Germany of the world economic crisis, which began in autumn 1929. The changes which took place in 1935-6 are indicative of two factors: by this time, the Nazis had made their medium term plans, and were beginning to implement them within the context of their long term aims; but at least as important is the end of the depression, and the consequent end to the emergency measures initiated to alleviate its effects, particularly the massive unemployment which was its chief characteristic.

To say this is not to deny that the position of women was affected by the coming to power of a Party which, indeed, had very fixed ideas about the role women should play in the life of the nation. But before the Nazis came to power the position of women in Germany had already been deeply affected by the economic crisis which had thrown millions of people in manual, clerical, managerial and professional positions out of work. It was the condition of the labour market which was undoubtedly the single most influential factor in the development of attitudes to and opportunities for women in wage and salary earning

positions outside the home, throughout the 1930s. Its impact went far beyond the narrow employment situation, affecting also educational policy and official attitudes to women in the family context, and brought Nazi theory about women's role into sharp conflict with the needs of the German economy, in its widest sense, in the later 1930s, particularly once Germany was at war.

The broad sections into which this book falls therefore include the position of women in marriage and family life, employment outside the home, higher education, and the professions. The relative, or even complete, neglect of subjects which fall outside these confines is to be regretted, and is due more to lack of space than to the absence of material. It has seemed sensible, for example, to omit more than passing reference to the Nazis' attempt to organise women in the Third Reich, to the girls' section of the Hitler Youth, the *Bund deutscher Mädel*, and to the women's Labour Service, and to aim to give these absorbing topics the coverage they merit in another work. Only fleeting mention is made of social mores, although there is a fairly full discussion of the position of the unmarried mother; and nothing is said about the contribution of women – like Ricarda Huch and Käthe Kollwitz, for example – to the cultural life of the Weimar Republic. The daily life of the working-class woman is alluded to, but not described in any systematic way. Particularly in the chapters dealing with education and the professions, the emphasis is on an extremely small minority of German women. But it was in these two areas that questions of women's rights were most alive, in Germany as in other European countries and North America. If the women affected by reforms in these areas even now constitute only a larger minority, it is nevertheless true that achievements there have eventually opened up questions of equality for women generally, in legal, economic and social affairs.

In the international context, it appears that, on the whole, women in Germany in the late 1930s were neither better nor worse off than women in other countries in terms of status and opportunities, even in the Third Reich. In the Weimar years there was, admittedly, the impression, at least, that German women were in a particularly fortunate position: for one thing, Germany had a far higher proportion of women legislators than most other countries. In 1926, when there were three women in the United States' Congress and six women in the Austrian parliament, there were thirty-two female Reichstag deputies. Again, in 1929, women constituted 1.1 per cent of the membership of the House of Representatives, 2.1 per cent of the House of Commons, and 6.7 per cent of the Reichstag.[3] Still in early 1933, there were fifteen women Members of Parliament in Britain and thirty-five women deputies in the Reichstag.[4] But, as the feminists were well aware, membership of the legislative body did not guarantee progress towards equality for women.

Much is made of how women lost their representation in the Reichstag under the Nazis, once Germany became a one party State; but it ought also to be remembered that in two of Germany's neighbours, France , and Switzerland, women did not even have the vote in the 1920s and 1930s.

Clearly, it is felt to be less reprehensible not to introduce a reform than to reverse one that has taken place. Much of the time the Nazis are – generally rightly – criticised for revoking progressive measures, whether they had been effective or not, and putting German women once again in a position similar to that obtaining in countries where reforms had not been effected. Perhaps the outstanding example of this is the law of 30 June 1933, which permitted the dismissal of married women from the civil service and departure from the principle of equal pay for men and women in civil service positions.[5] But in Britain, for example, women in the civil service had been, and were still being, discriminated against: British women had to wait until the mid-1950s before equal pay in the civil service was introduced,[6] while married women were – other than exceptionally – banned from the teaching profession until after the Butler Act of 1944.[7] The implication, then, is that Germany of the Weimar Republic was in the vanguard of those countries which accepted a more equitable position for women in public and professional life.

But the problem in Germany in the 1920s, as the feminists never tired of complaining, was that the Weimar Constitution, which affirmed equality of the sexes in education, in civil service appointments, and in terms of remuneration in the professions, was not the law of the land; it was possible at times to ignore its provisions, or at least to try to circumvent them, as some Land governments did in the 1920s. Where the intentions of the Constitution were observed, progress in winning a more equitable position for women was slow; but those who imagined that it could be otherwise were surely naive. In the Soviet Union, too, where the Constitutions of 1918 and 1936 declared equality of rights between the sexes, men continued to hold a near monopoly of the senior administrative positions, although women did increase their representation significantly in administrative and professional positions which carried less authority and responsibility.[8] Indeed, women quickly came to dominate – numerically, if not in terms of authority – the medical profession; but it is suggested that this was because doctors were poorly paid in the Soviet Union.[9]

Certainly, if there was no distinction between the sexes as regards professional opportunities in some other countries – for example, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania and Iceland, as well as the Soviet Union – in two of Germany's western neighbours, France and Belgium, the professions were not universally open to women; in addition, in other

countries, including Italy, Bulgaria, Greece, Norway (until 1938) and the Netherlands, there remained restrictions on women's eligibility for professional positions throughout the inter-war years. In Austria, under the Dollfuss regime, an order was issued in 1933 which was very similar to the German law of 30 June 1933, restricting opportunities for married women in the civil service.[10] Germany was, in fact, in the majority camp in the 1930s, with the Nazis' more reactionary measures well according with the trend in the many other European countries which in the 1920s and 1930s were falling under right-wing dictatorships.

Reactionary measures included the attempt to eliminate abortion and contraception in the Third Reich, a policy that was being followed in other European countries, particularly the predominantly Roman Catholic ones. In France, for example, where there was, as in Germany, deep concern about the declining birth rate, abortion was illegal and harsh penalties were afforded in the Penal Code for offenders. In 1920 a law was passed which provided that those manufacturing, selling or advocating contraceptive devices could be punished by a fine or imprisonment; it was to this obstacle to effective contraception that a rate of abortion estimated at between 300,000 and 500,000 per year during the 1930s was largely attributed. The one concession made was that therapeutic abortion – where the life of the mother was endangered – was permitted in 1939; but it was in the same year that the *Code de la Famille* sanctioned the imposition of more severe penalties for those selling abortifacients and contraceptives. No doubt influenced by wartime German policy, the French government in 1942 made abortion a crime carrying very severe sanctions, including the possibility of the death penalty.[11]

Toleration of abortion and free access to contraceptive advice were generally associated with Communism and, above all, Soviet Russia. Certainly, the Draconian penalties for abortion in Tsarist Russia were revoked by decree immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution, and in November 1920 abortion was formally legalised.[12] Those who criticised this policy as 'licentious' failed to add that the Soviet authorities regarded abortion as an evil, but one which would remain until adequate contraceptive provision obviated the need for it. It was less because this *desideratum* had been achieved than because of the growing international tension of the 1930s that abortion was banned in the 1936 Constitution of the Soviet Union; the raising of the birth rate became in the USSR, as in Hitler's Germany, a major official preoccupation, and Stalin's government, again like Hitler's, offered at the same time a number of incentives for procreation. The carnage of the Second World War led to the provision of more, and more attractive, incentives in 1944 to encourage the citizens of the USSR to compensate for the

immense losses, in the field and among civilians.[13]

To this extent, dictatorships of 'left' and 'right' followed similar, even identical, policies: Mussolini, too, imposed heavy penalties for abortion and the dissemination of contraceptive advice, and offered tax incentives and allowances to large families to encourage procreation. Again like Hitler and the Soviet regime, he provided improved welfare for mothers and infants, and attempted to remove the stigma from unmarried motherhood.[14] If their attitude towards abortion and contraception was repressive and harsh, the dictators gave the impression – for bellicose motives, no doubt – that they were more enlightened in matters of social welfare than most democratic governments, including the British ones in the inter-war years.

With regard specifically to the 1930s in Germany, it has been firmly asserted, and equally firmly believed, that the assumption of power by the Nazis meant a complete transformation in the position of women, and a transformation for the worse. Writing in January 1934, Alice Hamilton, an American doctor, asserted, on the basis of her own observations and information from inside Germany, that

> 'German women had a long and hard fight but they had won a fair measure of equality under the Republic. Now all seems to be lost and suddenly they are set back, perhaps as much as a hundred years.'[15]

This was the view that tended to be given by those who had emigrated from Germany in and after 1933 for political reasons.[16] But it is an accurate representation of neither the situation between the end of the Great War and 1933 nor that after 1933. The 'fair measure of equality' promised in the Weimar Constitution remained in many instances a dead letter because the Civil Code of the Empire, which became effective in 1900, and which had given men decisive superiority within the marriage relationship, remained the law of the land. While legislation was not forthcoming to implement the clauses of the Weimar Constitution which declared, for example, that both parents should have responsibility for the upbringing of their children, they remained purely pious affirmations of intent, without any legal effect. And while it was no doubt reasonable to assume from Nazi utterances before 1933 that in the Third Reich women would be sent back to the home *en masse*, the fact is that the Nazis, like any other party, found that proclaiming ideology in the safety of opposition was one thing, but that when they were put in the position of exercising power circumstances which were partly beyond their control, partly of their own making, obliged them to modify, and in some cases to abandon, previously formulated policy. Thus they found that during the Second World War they had to try to persuade married women and even mothers to go out to work, and not devote themselves entirely to home and family – the role

deemed most suitable for women in Nazi theory.

There is a risk in trying to revise earlier views of an historical phenomenon like National Socialism: one reviewer has expressed concern that revision may lead to a softening of attitudes towards this most evil of movements.[17] Thus, the difficulty in pointing out where critics of the Nazis have been in error, and especially where they have wrongly attributed bad or philistine policies to them, is that one may be suspected of consciously or unconsciously defending the Nazis. To try to avoid this, I must therefore now assert that I do not believe that it is possible to defend those who ruled Germany between 1933 and 1945. We all know that they committed the most heinous of crimes, of courting and causing a long and terrible war which brought death or immense suffering to millions of people throughout the world, and of treating with revolting and unspeakable brutality certain minorities, especially the Jews, for whom they nurtured an implacable and irrational hatred. Recognition of this makes it impossible for us to regard any aspect of Nazism dispassionately, and rightly so, I believe. But this should not place a taboo on analysing parts of the Nazi system in a methodical way; to explain it is not to justify it. I say this because at various places in this work I am obliged to state or to imply that 'this aspect of Nazi policy brought some benefit to women' or 'the Nazis did not initiate this policy which was disadvantageous to women'. To make such remarks, within highly restricted areas of discussion, is not to say that the net result of Nazi policies towards women was favourable, nor that the motives behind any apparently beneficial actions were benevolent.

Some understanding of basic Nazi beliefs and aims is essential to a discussion of their policies towards any group in society, in this case the female sex. From the hotchpotch that was Nazi ideology, the following assumptions consistently emerge. In the first place, the traditional divisions of class and creed were superseded by the fundamental division – in the Nazi view – of race. The Nazi leaders genuinely and fanatically believed that Jews, Slavs and the coloured peoples were inferior types of being; had they been less sincere in this belief, they might have been less dangerous. As it was, they claimed that the 'Aryan' race, to which those of German stock belonged, had, in order to protect and preserve itself, to use every means at its disposal to destroy these 'inferior peoples' before they destroyed the 'Aryan' race. The inherent malevolence of non-'Aryans' towards the 'Aryan' race was accepted as the logical corollary of their inferiority.

To further the survival of the race most fitted for leadership, physical exercise became a cult, while strength and 'Nordic' features became vital attributes. Quality, in this sense, was not, however, enough; in order to overcome the teeming hordes of these 'inferior peoples', the

relatively small numbers of the 'Aryan' race would have to be increased, urgently and on a huge scale. It was this obsessive line of thought, absolutely basic to the Nazi *Weltanschauung* (philosophy of life), which conditioned the Party's attitude to the role of women, since women are the childbearers of a nation. Men, as the other half of the genetic equation, were by no means exempt from official concern in this context: they were exhorted to marry young, and even, if they were public employees, threatened with being passed over for promotion if they did not marry and start a family.[18] But woman's biological function made her much more the focus of Nazi leaders' concern in questions of population policy. This applied only, of course, to the 'Aryan' race; women of other races could be worked to death or tortured in concentration camps, while intricate legislation was prepared to protect the reproductive capacity of 'Aryan' women. It was, after all, not at all desirable, in the Nazi view, that non-'Aryans' should procreate, since this only increased in number the enemies of the 'Aryan' race. For this reason, it was pointed out in 1939 that the strict prohibition of abortion did not apply to Jews.[19]

Within the 'Aryan' race, the primary division was that of sex, providing two complementary, not antagonistic, elements which each played a predetermined part in the gigantic jigsaw which was the life of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community). As Frau Scholtz-Klink, leader of the Nazi women's organisation, said in 1936, 'the guiding principle of German women today is not to campaign against men but to campaign alongside men'.[20] While men very definitely played the leading role in the Nazi State, with women excluded from political life, the Nazis did not accept that they were subordinating women completely to men; rather, they claimed, they were drawing a distinction – the natural distinction – between the areas of activity of men and women, so that each sex might better perform its function for the good of the nation. This insistence on the separation of the sexes is a crucial feature of Nazi policy towards women, in all areas of life. The sexes, then, were to come together only for what was seen as the most important function of all, procreation. The Nazis turned to the ancient Teutonic relationship – or, at least, what they thought it had been – where man was the warrior and woman the homemaker. They claimed that civilisation, especially in industrial society, had undermined the relationship between the sexes by altering the 'natural' roles of man and woman, and held that the differences between the sexes should not be denied or ignored, but gladly accepted, and indeed emphasised.

In the Nazi view, the chief difference was that man was essentially productive, and woman fundamentally reproductive. By the same token, man was creative while woman was imitative.[21] Thus, woman's position in Nazi society was to be one which gave her the chance to