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Female Nazi Perpetrators

Kara Mercure

Nazi women perpetrators have evolved in literary works as they have become more known to scholars in the last 15 years. However, public knowledge of women's involvement in the regime is seemingly unfamiliar. Curiosity in the topic of women's motivation as perpetrators of genocide and war crimes has developed in contrast to a stereotypical perception of women's gender roles to be more domesticated.

Much literature has been devoted to explaining Nazi ideology and how women fit into the system. Claudia Koonz's, *Mother's in the Fatherland*, demonstrates the involvement of women in support of National Socialism. The book focuses on women in support of the regime and how they supported the regime through domestic means. Robert G. Moeller's, *The Nazi State and German Society*, also examines how women were drawn to National Socialism and how their ideals progressed through the regime. The women used to focus on their futures and the future of their children, then it transformed into an age of focusing on the present. The women were less loyal to tradition and began striving for independence.

Another area in literary works is dedicated to explaining the active involvement of women in the regime. Many scholars are exploiting the female perpetrators because the topic is often overlooked. Wendy Adele-Marie Sarti, after much research, provides people with several accounts to shed some light on women's involvement in the Nazi Regime. Many people are unaware of how involved women actually were in the Nazi Regime. Women's roles ranged from complete domestication and bearing children for the regime to being active participants in the Nazi party and the annihilation of the Jewish people. Sarti's argument is that women are just as responsible for the atrocities that took place during the Nazi regime as the male population. Some women were even crueler than the male perpetrators. Jill Stephenson's, *Women in Nazi Germany*, discusses how women's roles were influential in Germany. She further examines how women were deemed victims or perpetrators of the regime. Then Stephenson expands upon the designated jobs they were allotted, such as homemakers, nurses and doctors, SS and Gestapo informers, and finally, concentration camp Aufseherin (overseers).

German women during the Nazi regime can be related to political scientist, Joshua Goldstein's theories as well. One that stands out in particular is the Gender Difference; here Goldstein examines aggression differences based on gender. At times females utilize verbal or social aggression over physical violence, which hurts the victim mentally, causing more damage at times.¹ Another theory Goldstein discusses is the idea that women have to try harder to impress their superiors in their positions.² There is a common disregard for women in masculine roles; thus, women try harder to impress the men around them and prove their worth.

Although German men have acquired a negative reputation through the Nazi Regime, women's roles are often neglected when explaining the Nazis. In fact, some women were equally

¹Joshua S. Goldstein. *War and Gender*. Cambridge (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 136.

² *Ibid.*, 201.

guilty of the atrocities that took place under the Nazis and should also be considered perpetrators of the Nazi Regime. While some women supported the regime only in the more traditional role as producers of Aryan children, others did so more actively as independent working women, seeking out jobs that provided them with money, power, and opportunity in the new order.

Nazi ideology was extremely dependent on the German women being compliant with Nazi beliefs. Women were to remain at home, producing children and teach the children the ways of the Nazi regime. Without these women to produce the children, Hitler's Germany would cease to exist. However, the underlying ideals of the regime were to keep women out of politics and war. Joshua Goldstein elaborates, "The Nazi ideology promoted a gender division, with women assigned to the home and the production of German children, while the men engaged in politics and war."³ While all of these ideologies shaped the women of the Nazi regime, some women were more inclined to be directly involved.

To better understand how these women perpetrators came to be, we must first look at what drove some women to support the National Socialist Party, then understand the roles women were to play in the German state along with how these perpetrators emerged from their predetermined roles. Next, we must explain how these women were selected and why they volunteered for their positions. Finally, we consider what crimes they committed and how they were punished after the war.

After the end of the First World War, German citizens were looking for a way to get out of economic hardship. Hitler's Nazi Party was one of the most appealing parties of the time, promising a better way of life and returning Germany back to its former glory. Professor Wendy Sarti states, "Nazism offered women of the lower social classes mobility."⁴ What Adolf Hitler did was give them hope, for a better life in these difficult times. As Historian Claudia Koonz explains, "In describing their attraction to Hitler, these women borrowed unstintingly from a religious vocabulary they must have learned as children studying the life of Christ."⁵ This goes to show how charismatic Hitler was and how he seemed Christ-like.

Women were also deceived by the Nazi propaganda, as it pushed women's involvement in the regime as necessary but hid its true intentions for women. The Nazi regime bombarded women with messages depicting a better Germany with the help of women, while also promoting women's domestic roles. Women also had to fall in line with the Nazis because often times there were no other choices. Lastly, many supported the National Socialist Party out of fear; "many of the smallest acts had consequences, often graver than people realized."⁶ Many feared that any

³Ibid., 71.

⁴Wendy Adele-Marie Sarti. *Women and Nazis: Perpetrators of Genocide and Other Crimes During Hitler's Regime, 1933-1945*. (Indiana University: Academia Press 2011), 30.

⁵ Claudia Koonz. *Mothers of the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics*. (New York. St. Martin's Griffin, 1987), 62.

⁶ Ibid., 313.

opposition to the new regime would result in severe punishment, which it often did. The Nazis' methods resulted in a society fearful of their government and with unquestioning loyalty.

Hitler's goal for women was to be the producers of the Aryan race. Women were made to be the homemakers while men were the protectors and breadwinners. Many women went along with the idea that their duty to the regime was to stay home, have children and teach them the ways of the Nazi party. However, the Nazi party also brought out a more masculinized side of women.⁷ Some of these women wanted to be a part of what the men were doing: going to war, meeting the Führer, participating in political policy making. These women would be the most loyal to the Reich and try to get out of their predetermined duty of having children. These women also felt that they needed to be utilized elsewhere, such as in support organizations, concentration camp warders, nurses, and doctors. Some women such as Elsbeth Zander, one of the first leaders to emerge because of her passion for motherhood and Hitler, fully supported the domestic role of women.⁸ Zander headed the German Women's Order that was tied to the Nazi party. Her belief was that "women should remain separate from men but equal in terms of their contributions to the movement."⁹ Zander remained adamant that women needed to be doing all they could to help their state while the men were off fighting the war. Zander stated, "...We women must through our quiet honest work, inspire the German male to do noble things once more! The German women shall and must again be worth sacrificing for..."¹⁰ The idea of women being overly feminized was to invoke men to protect their women because women could not protect themselves. Goldstein addresses the theory that "...men's participation in combat requires the psychological construction of a nurturing 'feminine' domain... Women must be kept apart from combat in order to fulfill their feminine roles in the war system, reinforcing soldiers' masculinity."¹¹ The women were to remain gentle and passive in hopes of giving men something to fight for, if not for their country, then for their women.

However, the fact that Germany was fighting a two-front war, for a longer time than Hitler had originally planned, caused their forces to begin deteriorating. Women's roles would need to be re-evaluated as Stephenson explains: "During the war, restricting women to 'womanly' areas was increasingly impractical, and many women graduates (college) enjoyed unprecedented opportunities.... Undoubtedly, however, most of these opportunities would have been withdrawn had Germany won the war."¹²

As the Second World War continued, the need for men to fight increased and the amount of men to work in factories and camps decreased. Hitler and his comrades had to decide how to solve this issue. Stephenson explains the solution, "The idea of labour conscription for women was repeatedly discussed, but it was not enacted until January 1943. Even then, it only affected

⁷ Ibid., 61.

⁸ Ibid., 72.

⁹ Robert G. Moeller. *The Nazi state and German Society: a brief history with documents*. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010), 41.

¹⁰ Ibid., 41.

¹¹ Goldstein., 301.

¹² Jill Stephenson. *Women in Nazi Germany*. (Harlow, England. Pearson Education Limited, 2001) 65.

women aged 17 to 45 at first, it permitted many exceptions, and it was imperfectly enforced.”¹³ However, some women volunteered for the jobs that were made available due to the lack of working men because it provided them with new opportunity, a chance to make more money, and to improve their position of power. This allowed women an opportunity to participate in some of the worst crimes during the Nazi regime. ¹⁴ These crimes were committed in a few distinct areas: the medical profession, the SS & Gestapo and concentration camps.

Women in the medical profession were social workers, nurses and doctors. Some of the first crimes committed by these medical workers took place during the T4 program. The T4 program was a government issued euthanasia program of the “mentally ill” or “hereditarily diseased”. The purpose of the T4 program was to rid German society of any person who might infect the Aryan race.

When the concentration camps emerged, many doctors and nurses were sent to these camps to conduct experiments on the prisoners. Many of the experiments performed were conducted as simulations of what soldiers would experience in the war, in hopes of improving medical effectiveness. Stephenson describes the process, “A few nurses and women doctors experimented on concentration camp inmates and, when they had ruined their health, dispatched them to a lingering and painful death.”¹⁵ Dr. Herta Oberheuser or Schlimme Ärztin, meaning Evil Doctor, as she was commonly referred to, was one of the female doctors at this time.¹⁶ She acquired this nickname because of the experiments she performed on prisoners while they were still alive. Sarti explains how the work of Herta Oberheuser contradicted her Hippocratic Oath: “Once she went to work in SS medical institutions and then the camp structure, her approach to medicine went against any oath to preserve life, and certainly went against any ethical teachings.”¹⁷ Many of the experiments Oberheuser performed were to mimic the wounds German soldiers would experience in battle. She often took random women in Ravensbrück and created large wounds on their bodies, then she exposed the wound to a bacteria and foreign objects to observe the reactions.¹⁸ These are just a few of the examples of women perpetrators in the medical field. By examining their role in Nazi society, we help define how corrupt these women became, disregarding their oaths to protect and improve the lives of humans. If sworn medical professionals showed such a disregard for human life, what would prevent other women from regarding human life in the same manner?

Another area women gained jobs were in the SS & Gestapo, working as spies and informers. According to Stephenson, “...there were various minor officials in the penal system who had contact with the prisoners or performed clerical work for commandants, the SS or the Gestapo.”¹⁹ Due to women’s lack of recognition among many German citizens, they made good

¹³ Ibid., 55.

¹⁴ Ibid., 112.

¹⁵ Ibid., 114.

¹⁶ Sarti., 169.

¹⁷ Ibid., 169.

¹⁸ Ibid., 173-174.

¹⁹ Stephenson., 113.

spies. They were helpful for the Gestapo but, because of the Germans' general outlook on women, they were often overlooked in these positions and were good at performing their duties because they were not suspected. Stephenson explains women's exposure, "Women employed as Gestapo spies and informers had direct contact with repression."²⁰ Women often witnessed crimes among the state and observed the cruel punishments by Gestapo men. "There were new networks of official informers, and, beyond them. There were thousands of individuals who denounced neighbours, lodgers, acquaintances and even spouses."²¹

Finally, the major role in which women were directly involved as perpetrators were as SS Aufseherin (female overseers). "...an organization such as the SS had an appeal for women who were looking to become involved with Nazism in a way not associated with domesticity."²² This was an opportunity for women who felt that they were more useful to the regime than just by producing children. Koonz explains the possible criteria to become an Aufseherin:

For a woman to become a guard required so major a departure from the normal values and experiences of women, perhaps the few who ended up on camp assignments were more apt to be depraved or deranged than men. Or perhaps women guards *seemed* more cruel because their behavior deviated farther from our conceptions of "feminine" models than men guards' behavior departed from stereotypes about men.²³

Sarti gives a rough estimate of 3,000 to 5,000 women being actively involved in the SS as guards.²⁴ These women all started at Ravensbrück because it was an all-female concentration camp. Ravensbrück was also designated the main locations for the training of Nazi female recruits; it was here where thousands of camp guards received their training, and it was also here where many women were subsequently employed as Aufseherin.²⁵ Sarti elaborates on the prerequisites for getting a position as an Aufseherin: all women were permitted to work if they had a criminal record; they also had to be in top health to be selected. If a woman was selected to become an Aufseherin, she was provided with training, salary, a uniform and somewhere to live.²⁶ Here, they learned what was to become of them and most were told that their jobs were to maintain control of the camps. Sarti explains how Nazi ideology was based on anti-Semitism, that the women involved as Aufseherin had to abide by the policies of the Nazi regime and become accepting of anti-Semitic ideals.²⁷ These teachings would shape the thinking of these women and transform their view of the Jewish population into criminals. While in Ravensbrück these women were trained in maintaining order, the Aufseherin were trained on how to effectively punish prisoners for any acts of indiscretion.²⁸ These Aufseherin were encouraged to

²⁰ Ibid., 114.

²¹ Ibid., 114.

²² Sarti., 31.

²³ Koonz, 404.

²⁴ Sarti., 40.

²⁵ Ibid., 54.

²⁶ Ibid., 43.

²⁷ Ibid., 55.

²⁸ Ibid., 43.

take out any anger or aggression on the prisoners; "...women went to work in a system that allowed for them to express, whether voluntarily or forced, their angers, frustrations, resentments and expressions of new-found power in a way that only men could previously."²⁹ Although they were given specific methods to maintain order, they often disregarded these methods and maintained order through their own inventive methods. Many women had dogs to help intimidate and attack prisoners.

After training at Ravensbrück, several of the cruelest women were transferred to other concentration camps such as Bergen-Belsen, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Majdanek. While at these camps, women were given positions as warders and Kapos. In these positions of authority, women were delegated with the punishment of prisoners. Some of these women were to make the selections of those who would be sent to the gas chambers to die, while others would be sent to medical facilities to take part in unethical experiments on the human body.

Infamous women in these positions included: Irma Grese, The Angel of Death; Maria Mandl, The Sadistic Beast and Queen of the Realm of the Dead; and Elisabeth Volkenrath, Nightmare Creature, to name a few.³⁰ These women have the reputation of having been ruthless in torturing prisoners; most relished the cruelty they administered. "Women victims were shocked by the pleasure some female warders took in inflicting cruelty from a position of power."³¹ Irma Grese was one of the more famous perpetrators of the time, her career is explained as "full of depravity, horror, extreme cruelty, forced bisexuality, and murder."³² She is known for performing her duties without hesitation and doing so without remorse.

What do these women have in common? Much of their reasoning for joining the *Aufseherin* was driven by money and opportunity for power. These women felt that they could progress in a way that would better represent their work values. Because of their drive for money, many women volunteered for positions within the concentration camp systems.

Several of the crueler women in *Aufseherin* positions had been exposed to the SS ways through marriage, giving these women access to the work force. Many of these women may have also experienced a traumatic event, such as the death of a parent, which may have provoked this terrible behavior. The interesting connection between many of the women is how they pleaded not guilty to their crimes in court and blamed their actions on superiors. Sarti expands upon the lack of responsibility the women took, "Many women came from average backgrounds and several blamed their superiors for their crimes, having refused at their trial to accept any personal culpability for their actions."³³ This lack of responsibility can be related to the social psychological experiment created by Stanley Milgram. "Milgram (1974) studied the extent to which ordinary people would follow the directives of an authority figure and inflict harm upon

²⁹ Ibid., 31.

³⁰ Ibid., 99,109,131.

³¹ Stephenson., 113.

³² Sarti., 113.

³³ Ibid., 60.

other human beings.”³⁴ The objective of this experiment was to observe how a person reacts (teacher) to orders while inflicting pain on a stranger (learner). The experiment concluded finding that 37% of the “teachers” completed the series of electric shocks to be administered until the end. This experiment tested the human boundaries linked to obedience and conformity. Perhaps this experiment can explain why some of these women behaved the way they did. Many of the women pled not guilty because of those superior figures pushing them to carry out these duties.

The trials at Bergen-Belsen provide a firsthand account of what crimes were taking place within the camps and how the Aufseherin acknowledged their behavior. Many denied most of the violent acts they committed or could not remember the events that occurred. Among those at the Bergen-Belsen trial were Irma Grese and Elisabeth Volkenrath.

In the prosecution of Irma Grese, having numerous witness accounts of her cruelty, Grese still maintained that she did not purposely harm anyone. She denied many accusations of beating prisoners unconscious, sending them outside the camp to be shot or allowing her dog to attack prisoners. Grese does, however, admit some beatings at the Bergen-Belsen trials, here are a few questions and answers taken from the trial transcripts:

- In Lager "C" you used to carry a walking-stick, too, and sometimes you beat people with the whip and sometimes with the stick? - Yes.
- Were you allowed to beat people? - No.
- So it was not a question of having orders from your superiors to do it. You did this against orders, did you? - Yes.³⁵

Grese’s responses to these questions demonstrate that superiors did not order her to take these actions. There is also the understanding that superiors felt the prisoners were replaceable; railways constantly brought in new prisoners, allowing camp guards to see them as disposable.

Elisabeth Volkenrath stated during the Bergen-Belsen trial, “It is true that I have had to make prisoners on Appell hold their hands above their heads but it was always on orders from others; this happened in Auschwitz on instructions from Mandel and Drechsel.”³⁶ Again there is consistency in the lack of responsibility in their actions. Volkenrath does admit to having participated in torturing the prisoners, however she does not feel completely responsible for her actions.

³⁴Leonard S. Newman. "What Is a "Social-Psychological" Account of Perpetrator Behavior?" In *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 47.

³⁵ War Crimes Trials-Vol. II. *The Bergen Belson Trial*. "Evidence for the Defendant Irma Grese." Accessed April 2014 http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/Trial/Trial/TrialDefenceCase/Trial_036_Grese.html#IrmaGrese

³⁶ War Crimes Trials-Vol. II. *The Bergen Belson Trial*. "Evidence for the Defendant Elisabeth Volkenrath." Accessed April 2014. http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/Trial/Trial/TrialDefenceCase/Trial_032_Volkenrath.html

The women who were tried in court were generally sentenced to 15 years in prison. The duration of their sentence depended on the severity of their crimes. Many of the *Aufseherin* were given 15 years but were later given a lesser sentence due to mitigation on their defense. However, women like Irma Grese and Elisabeth Volkenrath were both hanged on December 15, 1945.³⁷ Dr. Oberheuser was given 20 years for her crimes but her term was later reduced to ten and she was allowed to go back to practicing medicine.³⁸

Many claimed that they were just following orders. In Christopher Browning's book, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, many were just following orders. Their Battalion leader did allow a way out for those who did not want to participate in the killing of the Jews, however most men went through with the killings in fear of being the "weak link" of their group. The *Aufseherin* were not allowed a way out; they had to perform their duties in fear of reprimand from their superiors. Perhaps these women were in a similar situation; because Germans viewed females as the second sex, these women would have to outperform the men to gain respect and recognition. A potential way they dealt with horrific daily life was through cognitive dissidence, allowing them to accept what they were doing and come to terms with their moral dilemmas.

An interesting observation is that these women are rarely discussed in regards to Nazi Germany. Why is there a lack of public awareness on the topic of women perpetrators? Perhaps it is because women are to be viewed as passive and gentle beings that should not be tarnished with specific women's participation in the events of the Nazi regime. Oftentimes, women are only discussed in terms of helping the regime produce Aryan children or the involvement of nurses in the T4 programs. The topic of women as perpetrators has, throughout history, been disregarded. Many genocidal media coverage outlets report more masculine events because they are more believable, and women in the role of perpetrator is often a foreign concept due to preconceived notions of women as maternal, gentle, compassionate and, thus, unable to perform such crimes.

Overall, women in the Nazi regime are just as accountable as men, regardless of their roles in society. Women were directly and indirectly involved in the Nazi regime. Throughout Nazi Germany, women's roles varied and their involvement in crimes often blurs the line between active participation and self-preservation. Were the women producing Aryan children just as responsible as *Aufseherin* in concentration camps? Not to the same extent; however, the women that chose to produce Aryan children chose to follow Nazi ideology and supported the regime in this way. They turned their back to the Jewish population and abided by the laws the Nazis put forth. These women may be a more overlooked participant in the Nazi regime than the *Aufseherin*, however, they supported this government.

Women in the medical field had a responsibility to protect and save human beings. During the Nazi regime, their roles severely changed. Many in the field thought of their experiments as necessary to further their understanding of medicine. The experiments performed

³⁷ Sarti., 124

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 180

were on people considered sub-human and carried out in order to advance their knowledge in the medical profession. Through these experiments, nurses and doctors gained insight on how much the human body could take and how to effectively kill people. The nurses and doctors in the regime were to blame for some of the most atrocious acts within camps and hospitals.

Women working for the SS and Gestapo provided these two organizations with information by spying on people. They also denounced their own neighbors for being Jewish sympathizers and got them sent to camps. These women were active participants in the repression of their own German citizens along with Jewish people.

Finally, the women in positions of camp guards and Aufseherin were perhaps the most overlooked. These women were responsible for choosing prisoners that were sent to gas chambers or sent to hospitals for experiments. Many of these women performed crueler actions than many of the men. They beat prisoners constantly and humiliated them. Aufseherin were a secret to the outside world and many were surprised by the amount of women actually involved in the camp system.

Through my assessment, we can conclude that women were not innocent bystanders. Women's direct or indirect involvement helped shape the Nazi regime and maintain it through the years. The women directly involved are responsible for the crimes they committed and should be given more attention in the explanation of the Nazi regime. The women who chose these roles were motivated by money, power, and an opportunity to get away from the domestic role set forth by the regime.

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