

Women in Nazi Germany: Victims, Perpetrators, and the Abandonment of a Paradigm

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Introduction

The vast secondary literature on the Third Reich is matched in dimension only by the controversy contained within its discourse. During the Cold War era, historians in East and West Germany routinely placed the crimes of National Socialism within a historicized narrative that massaged away the complicity of a particular ideological element of society while condemning that of another. West German historian Gerhard Ritter, for example, linked the atrocities of the Third Reich to a “populist nationalism and a plebiscitary politics” thereby relieving “patriotic conservatives” from complicity in Nazi crimes.¹ Similarly biased, East German scholars historicized the Nazi past within a narrative of “bourgeois development” and linked their ideological opponents in the West to Nazi crimes through capitalism.² The histories of National Socialism produced in both East and West Germany in the first decades after World War II were largely built on ideological foundations that noticeably undermined their “objective” integrity.

In the 1960s a younger generation of historians in West Germany developed a “social science” approach to the study of the Nazi past termed *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*. Historians of this structural convention like Hans Ulrich Wehler and Fritz Fischer argued that the rise of National Socialism precipitated from Germany’s “special path”, or *Sonderweg*, to incomplete political and social modernization.³ By linking the ultra-right-winged elements of German society to the development of National Socialism and casting democracy as an oppressed victim, these historians hoped to bring greater legitimacy to the democratic

¹ Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 5-6.

² Ibid., 7.

³ Historians of this convention argued that “the inadvertent rise of democratic forces...was blocked by the authoritarian structures of the state and conservative forces, producing ‘structural’ tensions that led from smaller catastrophes to bigger ones—from the threat of civil war to world war and on to genocide.” Ibid.

heritage of contemporary West Germany.⁴ The early attempts of Cold War and *Sonderweg* historians stripped the Nazi past of its human – and inhuman – face and placed the causality and historical significance of the Third Reich within ideological and structural narratives that rarely moved beyond the context of contemporary political debates.

In the late 1970s, however, social historians in the West (particularly in Great Britain) were no longer willing to accept the structural and ideologically-tinted “master-narratives” of the previous decades and instead sought to “humanize” the history of the Third Reich. Following the methodological model of E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), historians like David Blackbourn and Tim Mason constructed their analyses of Nazi Germany from the “bottom-up” hoping to unearth if not evidence of resistance at least some sign that the poison of National Socialism was unable to permeate all levels of German society.⁵ Although Mason is considered one of the first historians to devote significant discussion to women’s roles and experiences within the working-class milieu of Nazi Germany, his primary interest was the working class in the Third Reich and in 1976 he did not “intend to do any further detailed research into the position of women in Nazi Germany in the near future.”⁶

Within this politically-charged and male-dominated debate over the proper cause and historical significance of National Socialism, women were largely absent as both subjects of inquiry and as scholarly contributors.⁷ In the 1980s, feminist historians Gisela Bock and Claudia Koonz remedied this historical and professional oversight and published ground-breaking investigations on women in Nazi society. Gisela Bock investigated sterilization and eugenics policies in pre-war Nazi Germany and argued that *all* women in the Third Reich were to some degree victimized under National Socialism.⁸ Claudia Koonz’s study of “mothers

⁴ Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2005, c.1997), 68-73.

⁵ Timothy W. Mason, *Social Policy in the Third Reich: The Working Class and the ‘National Community,’ 1918-1939*. trans. John Broadwin (Berg Publishing, 2003, c.1977); David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (New York, 1984).

⁶ Timothy W. Mason, “Women in Germany, 1925-1940: Family, Welfare and Work. Part II (Conclusion”, *History Workshop*, No. 2 (Autmn, 1976), pp. 2-32., 27.

⁷ Mary Nolan, “Work, Gender and Everyday Life: Reflections on Continuity, Normality and Agency in Twentieth century Germany,” Ian Kershaw & Moshe Lewin (eds.) *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorship in Comparison* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 329.

⁸ Gisela Bock, ‘Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany’, *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* Bridenthal et al. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), 271-296. First published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 8, no. 3 (1983)

in the fatherland” contrastingly argued that ‘Aryan’ mothers, although relegated to a private sphere of domesticity by the sexist policies of the Third Reich, played a major role in maintaining “normality” at home and thus provided at least a semblance of stability for the Nazi men engaged in mass murder and war.⁹ These contrasting conclusions led to a war-of-words between Bock and Koonz in academic journals over whether women in Nazi Germany were victims (*Opfer*) or perpetrators (*Täterin*). The first section of this paper takes a closer look at the Bock-Koonz / *Opfer-Täterin* debate of the late 1980s and argues that although ultimately a fruitless line of inquiry plagued by similar pitfalls as its ideological and structural forerunners, the search for “pure types” forced professional discourse to move beyond blanket generalizations and accept the “complex and contradictory” realities of the Nazi past.¹⁰

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the reunification of Germany in 1990, historians of National Socialism became increasingly suspicious of structural narratives and overextended generalizations.¹¹ Within the discourse on women in Nazi society, scholars Adelheid von Saldern and Mary Nolan questioned the efficacy of the *Opfer-Täterin* debate. They urged historians to abandon attempts to construct a “homogenized gender history” and accept the multiplicity of women’s experiences in the Third Reich as an historical reality. The second section of this paper examines this call for an abandonment of the Bock-Koonz debate and explores several works that effectively shed the *Opfer-Täterin* paradigm and provided a new and insightful look into the everyday lives of German women in Nazi society.

Opfer oder Täterin: A Fruitless Debate?

For many historians of women in Nazi Germany, Tim Mason’s two-part article “Women in Germany, 1925-1940: Family, Welfare and Work” marks the unofficial starting point of post-war historiography on the subject. First published in *History Workshop* in the spring of 1976, Mason’s article discussed the extent to which Nazi domestic policies regarding women, family life and work were able to penetrate and control the private spheres of German society, particularly those within the lower and working classes. As an historian of the British-Marxian

⁹ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987).

¹⁰ Phrases borrowed from Adelheid von Saldern, “Victims or Perpetrators? Controversies about the Role of Women in the Nazi State,” David F. Crew (ed) *Nazism and German Society, 1933-1945*, pp. 141-165.

¹¹ Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories*, 11. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (1992) is the well-known exception to this general trend.

convention, Mason approached the subject of women in Nazi Germany from the perspective of class conflict and privileged the working-class dimensions of Nazi society while relegating issues of race and gender to the periphery. Although Mason heavily qualified his assertions and was reluctant to espouse broad generalizations based on his admittedly “speculative” analysis,¹² he portrayed working-class women as “silent sufferers” and thus helped push the debate concerning women as *Opfer* or *Täterin* into the historical discourse on women in Nazi Germany.¹³

One of the first reactions to Mason’s class-based analysis came in 1983 with the publication of Gisela Bock’s “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization and the State.”¹⁴ In this article Bock questioned Mason’s Marxian preoccupation with class and argued that “neither race nor gender, racism nor sexism—and even less their connection—has been a central theme in German social historiography.”¹⁵ To remedy this oversight, Bock focused her analysis on Nazi eugenics and compulsory sterilization programs during the pre-war years (1933-1939) and argued that the racist and sexist policies of the Third Reich rendered all women – especially non-Aryan and ‘asocial’ women – victims of Nazi terror. Whereas Mason cautiously portrayed working-class women as “silent sufferers”, Bock rather explicitly declared that *all* women, regardless of caste and creed, were victimized by the policies National Socialism.

As a feminist historian Gisela Bock approached her investigation from the perspective of reproduction, or as she called it, “the reproductive aspect of women’s unwaged housework.”¹⁶ Through this lens, Bock examined Nazi eugenics policies and argued that women were the main targets of racism in the pre-war years of the Third Reich. On 14 July 1933, the National Socialists passed the ‘Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring’ which called for the sterilization of numerous non-’Aryan’ and ‘asocial’ Germans in order to protect the ‘purity’ of German progeny.¹⁷ A year later in July 1934, the sterilization laws as well as other decrees concerning women’s bodies were institutionalized with the formation of the State Health Offices with its Departments for Gene and Race

¹² Mason writes, “...at many points in the following pages the argument is perfunctory and speculative... [and] the evidence adduced remains incomplete.” Tim Mason “Women in Germany, 1925-1940: Family, Welfare and Work, Part I,” *History Workshop I* (Spring 1976), 75.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

¹⁴ Gisela Bock, ‘Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany’, *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* Bridenthal et al. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), 271-296. First published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 8, no. 3 (1983)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 272.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Care.¹⁸ As Bock points out, the Nazis created a large medical staff of over 12,000 officials and with this bureaucracy administered approximately 320,000 compulsory sterilizations between 1933 and 1939. Although men comprised roughly half of the 320,000 victims of compulsory sterilizations in the pre-war years, Bock argued that women were the Nazi's main focus and furthermore that women were deprived of a greater element of their identity – namely motherhood – by compulsory sterilization than were men. Clarifying this point in a later essay, Bock writes, “Women as well as men protested against their stigmatization as ‘second-class human beings’ ... but women complained of the resulting childlessness far oftener than men, especially young women.”¹⁹ To drive the point further, Bock goes on to cite testimonies from Nazi doctors recalling the rather appreciative attitudes (allegedly) expressed by non-’Aryan’ and ‘asocial’ men being prepped for sterilization. Reflecting on his experiences with male patients, a Nazi doctor wrote in 1936 that men were “happy that nothing [could] happen to them any more, that neither condoms nor douches [were] necessary, they [could now] fulfill their marital duties without restraint.”²⁰ Without any qualifications, Bock broached the opinion that mothers were the greatest victims of Nazi eugenics and hazardously supported it with a potentially propagandized source stating men welcomed the biological liberation of sterilization. Relying more on rhetoric than historical data, Bock constructed a precarious divide between the experiences of male and female victims of Nazi compulsory sterilization and in doing so her intentions – if they were not already apparent by her definition of “reproduction” – became explicit. Bock writes,

...where sexism and racism exist, particularly with Nazi features, *all* women are equally involved in both, but with different experiences. They are subjected to one coherent and double-edged policy of *sexist racism* or *racist sexism* (a nuance only of perspective), but they are segregated as they live through the dual sides of this policy.²¹

For Gisela Bock women were the primary victims of the eugenics policies devised and implemented by male leaders of National Socialism, and even when confronted with physical and psychological intrusion by the state, non-’Aryan’ and

¹⁸ Ibid., 275-278.

¹⁹ Gisela Bock, “Antinatalism in National Socialist Racism,” *Nazism and German Society, 1933-1945*. David Crew et al. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 117. This chapter was originally published in Gisela Bock & Pat Thane (eds), *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of European Welfare States, 1880s-1950s* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 253-269.

²⁰ Ibid., 117.

²¹ Gisela Bock, ‘Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany’ *When Biology Became Destiny*, 289

‘asocial’ men were able to rise above the injustice to a greater extent just by virtue of their sex.

Bock is regularly portrayed by historians as the overbold feminist who overextended her analysis of compulsory sterilization into a blanket assertion that *all* women in the Third Reich were victims and thus unbound by Nazi guilt.²² And this critique is arguably for good reason. Her assessment is almost immediately put into question by the fact that large numbers of women were employed by the ‘State Health Offices’ and ‘Departments for Gene and Race Care’ and not just as passive clerical workers but as nurses and doctors directly involved with eugenics in the pre-war years and later with euthanasia and the Final Solution.²³ Furthermore, Bock’s presumption that women were more severely affected by sterilization than men is contentious and largely based on the opinion that women’s identities are inextricably linked to notions of motherhood.²⁴ By supporting this opinion with a questionable “primary source” – the second-hand word of an anonymous Nazi doctor – Bock portrays women as complete victims and German men as either pseudo-victims or the primary perpetrators of Nazi terror. Although a path-breaking work and an essential contribution to the history of women in Nazi Germany, Bock’s blanket assertion that all women were victims to the racist and sexist policies of the Third Reich was hazardous at best and helped propel the *Opfer-Täterin* debate into the forefront of discourse in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In 1987 historian Claudia Koonz argued against Bock’s blanket assessment of female victimization in her mammoth monograph *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (1987) and initiated the so-called *Historikerinnenstreit*, or “quarrel among historians of women.”²⁵ Like Bock,

²² Mary Nolan, “Work, Gender, and Everyday Life in Twentieth Century Germany,” Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin (eds), *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 333-334.

²³ Ibid., 334.

²⁴ Mary Nolan wrote, “Bock presumes that all women found their identity in child-bearing and motherhood, an argument which applied to some of the women who were sterilized but certainly not to all of them.” Ibid. For an extended analysis on Bock’s assertion of female ‘motherly’ identity, see Atina Grossmann, “Feminist debates about women and National Socialism,” *Gender and History*, Vol. 3, no/ 3, (1991), 355.

²⁵ The *Historikerinnenstreit*, or “quarrel among historians of women”, takes its name from the late-1980s *Historikstreit*, or “(male) historians quarrel”. The *Historikstreit* was a public debate that started in 1986 between West German philosophers Ernst Nolte and Jürgen Habermas over the proper place of the Nazi past within the history of West Germany. For Nolte, the Holocaust and Nazi crimes were an historical aberration, linked to Russian Bolshevism and thus disconnected in a sense from the history proper of West Germany. For Habermas, however, the Holocaust and Nazi past were inextricably “German” in origins and cannot and should not be so

Koonz approached her investigation from the understanding that ‘Aryan’ women in Nazi Germany existed within a predominantly private, domestic sphere and had almost no direct influence on the male leaders of National Socialism. Koonz wrote, “The separation between masculine and feminine spheres, which followed logically from Nazi leaders’ misogyny, relegates women to their own space—both beneath and beyond the dominant world of men.”²⁶ But instead of interpreting the Nazi’s relegation of women as evidence of their non-involvement in Nazi and uniform victimization, Koonz argued that within the domestic sphere women were not isolated but actively politicized and mobilized for Nazi war efforts. She wrote, “Far from being helpless or even innocent, women made possible a murderous state in the name of concerns they defined as motherly. The fact that women bore no responsibility for issuing the orders from Berlin does not obviate their complicity in carrying them out.”²⁷ For Koonz, ‘Aryan’ women and especially mothers were accomplices to the Third Reich and were indirectly responsible for Nazi terror and the genocide of millions deemed unfit to live.

In *Mothers in the Fatherland*, Koonz focused predominantly on the lives and experiences of ‘Aryan’ women who to varying degrees and for a variety of reasons bought into the separate-sphere dichotomy of gender roles under National Socialism. This focus on prominent female “accomplices” to Nazi crimes like Gertrud Scholtz-Klink – the “Lady *Führer über Alles*” of the *NS-Frauenschaft* – offered a poignant counterpoint to Bock’s assertion that *all* women were victims of the racist and sexist policies of the Third Reich. Koonz rhetorically asked the reader, “...did women really remain immune to what Erich Fromm called ‘the craving for submission and lust for power’ that had engulfed the German nation...We don’t have to estimate—we know that women nearly as strongly as men supported the Nazis during the years of their spectacular rise to power

easily thrown asunder in the name of recovering some usable German past. For more on the issues and impacts of the debate see Geoff Eley, “Nazism, Politics and the Image of the Past: Thoughts on the West German Historikerstreit 1986-1987.” *Past and Present* 121 (1988): 171-208, and Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust and German National Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988). Also, for an excellent discussion of the primary differences between the *Historikerstreit* and *Historikerinnenstreit* see Elaine Martin’s “Victim, Collaborator, Resister, Perpetrator? Women Writers Respond to National Socialism,” at the Symposium, “German Women Writers from Weimar to the Present,” at the University of Maryland, 25-28 February 1993; and Mary Nolan, “The *Historikerstreit* and Social History,” *New German Critique*. No. 44, Special Issue on the *Historikerstreit* (Spring – Summer, 1988), pp. 51-80.

²⁶ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

between 1930 and 1932.”²⁸ Furthermore, Koonz argued that the ‘motherly’ ideals pushed by Nazi women leaders like Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, Elsbeth Zander, and Guida Dehl demonstrated that Nazi mothers were not victims to the Nazi’s racist-sexist policies but rather actively involved in the production of the ideal racially superior family. Koonz wrote,

[Women] gave men Nazis the feeling of belonging not just to a party, but to a total subculture that prefigured the ideals of the Nazi state for which they fought. Women kept folk traditions alive, gave charity to poor Nazi families, cared for SA men, sewed brown shirts, and prepared food for rallies. While Nazi men preached race hate and virulent nationalism that threatened to destroy the morality upon which civilization rested, women’s participation in the movement created an ersatz gloss of idealism.²⁹

For Koonz, Nazi women were not passive victims or “small cogs in the majestic wheel” of Nazi totalitarianism;³⁰ they were motherly accomplices who retreated into their spheres of domesticity while knowing full well the implications of their silence for those deemed “unfit to live” by the male Nazi authorities.

Koonz’s *Mothers in the Fatherland* was an essential contribution to the discourse on women in Nazi Germany for several reasons. Firstly, Koonz offered a counterpoint to Bock’s generalization of women as victims, and the subsequent *Historikerinnenstriet* between the two forced scholarship in the late 1980s to embrace the reality that some women – and especially mothers – helped to create and maintain the ersatz idealism of the Nazi home front. Secondly, Koonz argued that new evidence was required to assess the experiences of women in Nazi Germany because women’s “voices” were generally silenced in state-produced documentation from the Third Reich. Koonz wrote, “...few women Nazis’ voices spoke from the past or, more precisely, from the sources in national archives.”³¹ To bring voice to the voiceless, Koonz looked to Protestant and Catholic Church records because “for centuries the church had played the role for women in public life what politics had played for men. Men talked high theory and traded low gossip at the local *Stammtisch* (neighborhood pub); women gathered at the rectory to organize community projects and mind the parish’s business.”³² Records from numerous Protestant and Catholic churches throughout Germany granted Koonz

²⁸ Ibid., 185.

²⁹ Ibid., 5.

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (Harcourt, Brace, 1951), 321.

³¹ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, 8.

³² Ibid., 9.

access to the everyday experiences of Christian women in Nazi Germany and to previously hidden instances of female complicity *and* resistance.³³ Although often overlooked, Koonz's chapters on "Catholic Women between the Pope and Führer" and "Courage and Choice: Women Who Said No" discussed a network of rebellion that involved hundreds of Catholic women working to save Jews and other non-'Aryans' from the Nazi labor camps and gas chambers.³⁴ Despite these strong and important chapters on female resistance, however, Koonz's work in *Mothers in the Fatherland* was (and to a great extent still is) perceived by scholars as the counterpoint to Bock's thesis and a staunch condemnation of Nazi women and especially mothers who helped maintain the semblance of familial normality in the midst of war and genocide.

The rigid "separate sphere" dichotomy employed by both Gisela Bock and Claudia Koonz severely limited the abilities of their analyses to move beyond blanket generalizations of female experience in Nazi Germany. Despite these shortcomings, however, the *Historikerinnenstreit* that ensued between the two pushed historians to examine the complex experiences of women in the Third Reich. Gisela Bock brought much-needed attention to the fact that historians were neglecting women's gendered experiences in Nazi Germany and ignoring the presence of severe anti-feminism within the ideologies and policies of National Socialism. Likewise, Claudia Koonz's investigation of "mothers in the fatherland" pushed historians to accept the reality that even women relegated to the domestic "separate sphere" of Nazi society were in some degree complicit in the actions and atrocities of the Third Reich. Although the search for "pure types" was ultimately a fruitless debate, the *Historikerinnenstreit* provided the necessary impetus for future historians to break through and unhinge the over-generalized and structural interoperations of the Nazi past.

Beyond the Search for "Pure Types"

Through the 1980s and into the early 1990s, historians of women in Nazi Germany "seldom went beyond vague assertions of 'collective guilt' or equally

³³ An often overlooked element of Koonz's analysis in *Mothers in the Fatherland* is her acceptance that women in Nazi Germany had different experiences and as a result cannot be placed in a rigid classification of either 'victim' or 'perpetrator', innocent or guilty. She writes, "German women varied in both support and opposition, as victims and perpetrators." Ibid., 12. Of all the articles and monographs utilized for this paper, only Mary Nolan's "The *Historikerstreit* and Social History," *New German Critique*. No. 44, Special Issue on the *Historikerstreit* (Spring – Summer, 1988), p. 70, commends Koonz for her investigation of "multiple perspectives."

³⁴ Ibid., 267-344, esp. 298-305.

simplistic attempts to differentiate between the ‘victims’ and the ‘perpetrators.’”³⁵ For Gisela Bock, the men of the Nazi regime sought to control all elements of reproduction and thus oppressed and victimized *all* women in Nazi society. Claudia Koonz contrastingly argued that ‘Aryan’ women were not victimized by their relegation to the separate sphere of Nazi domesticity but rather mobilized as motherly accomplices to the Reich. But in the early 1990s – in the wake of German unification and the end of the political bipolarity of the Cold War – historians of women in Nazi Germany started to drift away from overarching generalizations, and as David F. Crew argued, began “to realize that most women in the Third Reich cannot simply be cast in the role of ‘victim’ or ‘perpetrator’.”³⁶

In 1994 Adelheid von Saldern questioned the efficacy of the *Opfer-Täterin* debate in her essay “Victims or Perpetrators? Controversies about the Role of Women in the Nazi State” and argued that the experiences and roles of women in Nazi Germany were not so black and white.³⁷ According to von Saldern, Gisela Bock and Claudia Koonz were stubbornly attempting to “homogenize” gender history through assertions of a general female experience in Nazi Germany. She wrote,

Female historians cannot and should not expect to achieve a homogenous interpretation of the role of women in the Third Reich...In the everyday realities produced by German fascism, ordinary men and women became complex and contradictory combinations of both victims *and* perpetrators.³⁸

Von Saldern called for an abandonment of the search for “pure types” and a reevaluation of historical method in order to access the “complex and contradictory” roles and experiences of women in Nazi society.

Adelheid von Saldern waged her primary criticism against Bock’s rigid understanding of “separate spheres” for men and women in Nazi Germany. This “separate sphere” approach, argued von Saldern, ignored the fluidity between public and private spheres in the Third Reich produced by the Nazi politicization of reproduction, the family, and the home. Drawing from the insights of Ernst Fraenkel’s *Der Doppelstaat* (1941),³⁹ von Saldern argued that “neither sphere was

³⁵ David F. Crew (ed), *Nazism and German Society, 1933-1945* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁷ Adelheid von Saldern, “Victims or Perpetrators? Controversies about the Role of Women in the Nazi State,” David F. Crew (ed) *Nazism and German Society, 1933-1945*, pp. 141-165.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁹ Fraenkel, a renowned German political scientist, constructed a methodological approach to the study of Nazi Germany that called for a fluidity between the *Massnahmenstaat*, or ‘prerogative state’ and the *Normenstaat*, or ‘normative state’. This method is borrowed by von Saldern to

independent of the other; in the private sphere...women (and men) were repeatedly confronted with regulations imposed by the public sphere...”⁴⁰ Furthermore, ‘Aryan’ women in Nazi Germany stepped out of the home and into the public sphere as members of the *BdM* and *NS-Frauenschaft*, as nurses and doctors in the Nazi eugenics programs, as secretaries and operators for the Nazi bureaucracy, and even as SS guards at concentration camps. Therefore, von Saldern argued, “we cannot be satisfied with a description of women as merely the victims and the objects of Nazi policy [because] the private sphere was by no means a safe and sane refuge.”⁴¹ Von Saldern extended this critique to Koonz’s arguments as well and pointed out that her reliance on the separate sphere dichotomy to produce an assessment of female complicity was “equally open to attack.”⁴² Instead of searching for victims and perpetrators, Adelheid von Saldern urged historians to examine the multiple experiences of different women in Nazi Germany without preconceived notions of their victimization or culpability. Von Saldern’s call for a methodological reevaluation can be viewed as an important turning point⁴³ in the historiography on Nazi Germany because it pointed out the limitations of the *Opfer-Täterin* paradigm and embraced complexity and difference as an historical reality within gender history. Instead of trying to rescue or condemn certain elements of Nazi society within the historical record, von Saldern argued that historians should focus their energies on unearthing the “complex and contradictory variety of women’s experiences” in order to “better understand what real women thought, felt and did during the Third Reich.”⁴⁴

Three years later, Mary Nolan similarly critiqued the Bock-Koonz debate and argued that historians of women in Nazi Germany must move past the “polarized terms” of *Opfer* and *Täterin* and focus instead on the subjective experiences of everyday life in the Third Reich.⁴⁵ Nolan’s essay “Work, Gender

establish fluidity between the rigid spheres established by the Bock-Koonz debate. See Ibid., 147, 162 n.22.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 148.

⁴¹ Ibid., 151.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ It should be noted that von Saldern’s article was a turning point for publications in English. Generally cited as the earliest attempt to move beyond the victim-perpetrator debate is Lerke Gravenhorst, ‘Nehmen wir Eigentum in Anspruch? Zu Problemen im feministischsocialwissenschaftlichen Diskurs der BDR’, in Lerke Gravenhorst and Carmen Tatschmurat (eds), *Töchter Fragen NS Frauengeschichte* (Freiburg, 1990), pp.17-37.

⁴⁴ Adelheid von Saldern, “Victims or Perpetrators? Controversies about the Role of Women in the Nazi State,” p. 142.

⁴⁵ Mary Nolan, “Work, Gender and Everyday life: Reflections of Continuity, Normality and Agency in Twentieth-century Germany,” in Ian Kershaw & Moshe Lewin (eds), *Stalinism and*

and Everyday Life: Reflections on Continuity, Normality and Agency in Twentieth-century Germany” functioned primarily as an extended review of contemporary works that were helping to explode generalized interpretations of women’s experiences in Nazi Germany. Nolan argued that the convention of social history known as *Alltagsgeschichte*, or “everyday life history,” provided the necessary methodological tools to break through past generalizations and unearth the subjective experiences of women in the Third Reich.

Popularized in the 1970s and 1980s by social historians in West Germany, *Alltagsgeschichte* was a methodological response to the *Sonderweg* theses promoted by scholars like Fritz Fischer, Hans and Wolfgang Mommsen, and Hans Ulrich Wehler.⁴⁶ Historians of everyday life argued that “social science histories” stripped the past of its “human face” and reduced it to a structural narrative of positivistic political and economic development.⁴⁷ In order to “humanize” German history, *Alltags* historians constructed micro-narratives of the subjective thoughts, experiences, and actions of individuals using sources like memoirs, oral histories, and popular fiction *in addition* to the traditional “top-down” sources produced by policymakers. As a group of modern historians of everyday life in Germany recently wrote, “By focusing on the individual subjective actor’s creative potential in the world, the historian of everyday life can integrate the micro and the macro, cause and consequence.”⁴⁸ As an historian of everyday life, Mary Nolan argued that the structural interpretations authored by Bock and Koonz were unable to elucidate the complexities of women’s experiences because, much like the *Sonderweg* approach, they attempted to fit a complex past into a structural generalization. Instead of debating arbitrary absolutes, Nolan urged historians to assemble a “detailed historical reconstruction of the different experiences of

Nazism: Dictatorship in Comparison (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 311-342.

⁴⁶ These historians constructed “social science histories” and argued that historical change was a function of “anonymous structures and processes.” They believed that German history followed a “special path” of incomplete modernization, or *Sonderweg*, and argued that the development of German industry in the 19th and early 20th centuries was not accompanied “by a modernization of social relations and politics.” This lack of social and political development, so the argument goes, allowed conservative tendencies to flourish in Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and inevitably led to the totalitarian dictatorship and atrocities of the Third Reich. See Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2005, c1997), 69-72.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁸ Paul Steege, Andrew Stuart Bergerson, Maureen Healy, and Pamela E. Swett, “The History of Everyday Life: A Second Chapter”, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vo. 80, No. 2 (June 2008), pp. 358-378.

different women, their particular forms of repression, their possibilities for action, and their degree of responsibility.”⁴⁹ This approach allowed historians to move from the macro to the micro, from the political and economic policies of the Nazi party to the ways in which ordinary people in Nazi Germany responded and reacted to them.⁵⁰

In 1999 Elizabeth D Heineman turned von Saldern’s and Nolan’s methodological urgings into a reality with the publication of her monograph *What Difference Does a Husband Make? Women and Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany*.⁵¹ In this original and comprehensive study, Heineman examined the history of single women in Germany from the beginning of the Third Reich in 1933 to the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 through the lens of marital status. Instead of focusing on the stereotyped Nazi *Hausmütter*, Heineman investigated single, divorced, and widowed women, or “women standing alone,” and the ways in which shifting Nazi policies on marital status influenced their subjective experiences during the war and Allied occupation. She wrote, “this study will move between the local and national levels in order to examine both the making and the effects of public policy” and thus at more comprehensive understanding of women’s subject experiences in relation to the shifting definitions of marital status under the Nazi regime.⁵² By “integrating the macro and the micro,”⁵³ Heineman employed an *Alltagsgeschichte*-esque approach that, as von Saldern and Nolan urged, moved beyond the search for “pure types” and allowed those previously hidden from history – “women standing alone” – the opportunity to add their perspectives and experiences to the record.

Heineman started her investigation of “women standing alone” in the mid-1980s for a dissertation on the “women of the rubble” who figured so prominently in the popular culture and memory of West Germany in the 1950s. But with the fall of the Soviet block and reunification of Germany – events she “could never have dreamed” would occur during the course of her research – her dissertation was turned on its head by the newly-accessible archives in the East. Heineman wrote,

⁴⁹ Mary Nolan, “Work, Gender and Everyday life: Reflections of Continuity, Normality and Agency in Twentieth-century Germany,” *Ibid.*, 335.

⁵⁰ Nolan argued that everyday life history “examines the relationship, real and perceived, between continuities in the economic, social, and cultural realms across the period from the 1920s to the 1950s and the ‘normality’, real and perceived, of many aspect of Nazi society.” *Ibid.*, 316.

⁵¹ Elizabeth D. Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make? Women and Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵³ Paul Steege, Andrew Stuart Bergerson, Maureen Healy, and Pamela E. Swett, “The History of Everyday Life: A Second Chapter,” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vo. 80, No. 2 (June 2008), 367.

“Topics that had left mountains of records in West Germany, like the status of unwed mothers and war widows’ pensions, seemed to have been nonissues in the East.”⁵⁴ There were proportionally as many “women standing alone” in the East as there were in the West at the onset of Allied Occupation, but in the former-DDR they were largely missing from the national archives and even less present in popular memory and culture. *What Difference Does a Husband Make?* was Heineman’s attempt to “untangle this web of comparative, interlocking histories” and place single women and their “shattered” pasts into the forefront of historical discourse on the reunified German nation.

Between 1933 and 1939 Nazi policymakers went to great lengths to definitively divide German women along racial and marital lines. For women deemed non-’Aryans’ or ‘asocials’, marriage was not an option and, as Gisela Bock pointed out, sterilization ensured that even if their marital status changed, their reproductive potential would never be realized.⁵⁵ For women deemed “valuable” to the German *Volksgemeinschaft*, marriage and childbirth were the ultimate ideological goals. But, as Heineman argued, the Nazis also devoted significant attention to the roles of single ‘Aryan’ women and became increasingly more accepting of their contributions to the Reich as laborers, party activists, nurses, seamstresses, and even as unwed mothers.

Almost immediately after taking control in 1933, National Socialist policymakers went to great lengths to define and legitimize the status of single ‘Aryan’ women in Nazi society. In 1934 the Nazis established the *Pflichtjahr*, or “year of duty,” and (forcefully) removed single, ‘Aryan’ girls and women ages 17 to 25 from their homes and relocated them to farms and factories throughout the country.⁵⁶ In February 1938 the *Pflichtjahr* was institutionalized by the Third Reich, and women seeking paid employment in any industry were required by law to first complete their un-paid “year of duty.” After the onset of war and subsequent depopulation of men to the front, National Socialist policymakers expanded the *Pflichtjahr* requirements and attached an additional six-month Auxiliary War Service to the civic duties of single ‘Aryan’ women. The Auxiliary War Service brought women into direct contact with the war effort and by 1944 some women were even operating antiaircraft guns and searchlights during Allied

⁵⁴ Ibid., xiv.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth D. Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make? Women and Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany*, 18; and Gisela Bock, “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany,” 271.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 40-45.

air raids.⁵⁷ Despite their efforts to define marital status in the pre-war years, National Socialist policymakers were unable to maintain their rigid dichotomies during the war due to increased demand for labor, bureaucrats, and soldiers.

The marital divide for married 'Aryan' women was also heavily blurred by the slide into total war, deteriorating domestic conditions, and the Reich's need for increased war-time labor and civil service. Heineman argued that during pre-war years, National Socialist policymakers were hesitant to push the increasing demand for labor onto the middle-class 'Aryan' mothers and instead sought to legitimize the labor and civil service of single women. But after the *Wermacht's* defeat in Stalingrad and the intensification of Allied air raids in the winter of 1943/44, Nazi policymakers were unable to maintain the strict divisions between single and married 'Aryan' women and were forced to mobilize all women, married and single, for the war effort. Heineman argued that this blurring of marital status in Nazi Germany during the war makes it difficult to definitively assess one's role as either victim or perpetrator. She wrote, "Marital status did not divide women into neat categories of victim and victimizer, loser and beneficiary of Nazism. It did, however, affect the ways women were sometimes implicated in, sometimes damaged by, the Nazi regime."⁵⁸ For past historians like Bock and Koonz, women's identities were rigidly prescribed and maintained by a male-dominated and male-created separate sphere dichotomy. But for Heineman, the fluidity of public and private spheres especially during the height of war and slide into defeat makes it impossible to speak of "pure types". Heineman abandoned the *Opfer-Täterin* paradigm and embraced the historical reality that women in Nazi Germany were victims, perpetrators, and sometimes simultaneously both.

Although the search for "pure types" was largely abandoned by historians writing in the late 1990s and into the new millennium, the historical reality that some women in Nazi Germany were perpetrators while others were victims was by no means omitted from discourse. What changed was the ways in which historians approached the subject of victim or perpetrator and the extent to which they would then extend their analyses into blanket generalizations. Elizabeth Heineman's *What Difference Does a Husband Make?* examined shifting definitions of marital status in Nazi Germany and the ways in which fluctuations in women's identities shaped their subjective experiences during and after the war. Instead of forcing the women in her narrative into distinct and rigid categories of *Opfer* or *Täterin*, Heineman accepts the fluctuation of women's experiences and seeks to access that

⁵⁷ Ibid., 65-67. Also, for a succinct summary of the effects of war on single women's labor and military service see Jill Stephenson, *Hitler's Home Front: Württemberg under the Nazis* (New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), esp.153-192.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 73.

multiplicity empirically through the sources. In a similar vein, Vandana Joshi argued that “there is a need...to avoid broader generalizations and to talk about the niches, milieux and enclaves” in which German women lived under the Third Reich.⁵⁹ In her monograph *Gender and Power in the Third Reich: Female Denouncers and the Gestapo, 1933-1945* (2003) Joshi examined the history of denunciation in Düsseldorf and argued that women played a significant role as denouncers in the Gestapo’s operations within the city. Joshi used Robert Gellately’s *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy, 1933-1945*⁶⁰ as a model and argued that the Gestapo in Düsseldorf relied heavily upon public denunciation for leads and “tip-offs”. As Gellately’s study of Gestapo files in Lower Franconia revealed, ordinary men and women who utilized denunciation did so for a variety of racial, political, economic, and personal reasons. Similarly, Joshi’s assessment of 366 Gestapo case files from the Düsseldorf archives showed that women utilized denunciation not out of loyalty to the Nazi state but most often to “vent their frustrations and agonies in conjugal life.”⁶¹ In order to understand women’s complex and contradictory motivations for denouncing neighbors, relatives, and husbands to the Gestapo, Joshi placed her investigation within the context of a gendered but increasingly porous Nazi society in which “the ‘private’ became ‘public’” and the sphere of domesticity became increasingly politicized due to war.⁶²

In the mid-to-late 1990s, historians Adelheid von Saldern and Mary Nolan called for the abandonment of the *Opfer-Täterin* paradigm and argued that ‘Aryan’ women in Nazi Germany were neither purely victims nor purely perpetrators of Nazi crimes. Approaching her study of shifting marital status in Nazi Germany from this perspective of fluctuating societal and gender roles, Elizabeth D. Heineman offers a realistic portrayal of single ‘Aryan’ women’s experiences as war forcefully and drastically altered the societal landscape. Likewise, Vandana Joshi focuses on the particular “niches, mileux, and enclaves” that in many ways influenced women in Düsseldorf to denounce fellow Germans to the Gestapo. By

⁵⁹ Vandana Joshi, *Gender and Power in the Third Reich: Female Denouncers and the Gestapo, 1933-1945*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 191.

⁶⁰ Gellately investigated Gestapo files from Lower Franconia and Bavaria and highlighted the importance of public denunciations for the Gestapo’s domestic operations to root out racially inferior and ‘asocial’ men and women from the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Due to the limited personnel and resources of the Gestapo, particularly in Lower Franconia, the “secret state police” relied heavily upon denunciations from private citizens (both men and women) to perform their duty. See Robert Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy 1933-1945* (Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁶¹ Vandana Joshi, *Gender and Power in the Third Reich*, 81.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 43.

abandoning the search for “pure types” and shifting the focus of interpretation from macro-level generalizations to micro-level, empirical analyses, both Heineman and Joshi were better able to access the complex and contradictory “way it was” for ‘Aryan’ women in Nazi Germany.

Conclusion

The Bock-Koonz *Historikerinnenstrieit* of the mid-to-late 1980s was in many ways a reflection and continuation of the broader historiographical issues surrounding the history of the Third Reich. Although connected to the movement of social historians attempting to humanize the Nazi past and push back against the structures and ideologies of previous interpretations, feminist scholars Gisela Bock and Claudia Koonz fell back into a schematic of macro-generalization. The *Opfer-Täterin* debate was ultimately unable to substantiate a definitive answer either way, but it brought the issue of women’s complex experiences in the Third Reich to the forefront of historical discourse on Nazi Germany.

Adelheid von Saldern and Mary Nolan’s call to abandon the search for “pure types” and move past the *Opfer-Täterin* paradigm marked a turning point in this discourse. In particular, Mary Nolan’s use of an *Alltagsgeschichte* approach revealed that historians were becoming increasingly interested in the “complex and contradictory” experiences of women in relation to the male-dominated political and social transformations highlighted in macro-level analyses. By bringing the macro and the micro together, historians like Elizabeth D. Heineman and Vandana Joshi were more accurately able to assess the ways in which shifting Nazi policies and ideologies affected ‘Aryan’ women as they went about their lives in the war-torn racial state.

In addition to using ‘social’ history conventions like *Alltagsgeschichte*, historians of women in Nazi Germany within the last ten years have increasingly turned to the methods of cultural and oral history.⁶³ Cynthia Crane’s *Divided Lives: The Untold Stories of Jewish-Christian Women in Nazi Germany* (2000) made a convincing case for the inclusion of oral testimonies in the study of *Mischlinge* – “half breeds” with traces of Jewish ancestry – in the Third Reich.⁶⁴ Similarly, Eric

⁶³ On second read this phrase overplays the division between *Alltagsgeschichte* and methodologies often corralled as ‘cultural’ history. Mary Nolan wrote that some historians of everyday life “rely primarily on sources generated by the Nazi regime, such as Gestapo reports, others on documents from firms and private organizations, and still others from memoirs, letters, and oral histories.” Mary Nolan, “Work, Gender and Everyday Life in Twentieth-Century Germany,” 313.

⁶⁴ Crane’s work is often overlooked because of her personal connection to the subject: her grandfather was of Jewish descent and had married an ‘Aryan’ woman, their son, Crane’s father, was a *Mischling*. Cynthia Crane, *Divided Lives The Untold Stories of Jewish-Christian Women in Nazi Germany* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 4-7.

A. Johnson and Karl-Heinz Reuband's *What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany* effectively utilized the oral testimonies of both 'Aryan' and Jewish Germans who lived through National Socialism to come to a better understanding of "what they knew" about the human cost of Nazi racism and military quest for European hegemony.⁶⁵

Greater information and research is needed to better access the subjective experiences of 'Aryan' women in Nazi Germany and the ways in which the war shaped their perceptions of gender in relation to National Socialist rhetoric and policy. To what extent did 'Aryan' women in Nazi Germany buy into the pre-war rhetoric and policies of the National Socialist "racial state"? What social, familial, economic, and political factors influenced 'Aryan' women to support, oppose, or submit to the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*? And how did Germany's slide into total war in the winter of 1943 and the intensification of Allied air raids in western cities affect 'Aryan' women's perceptions of the National Socialist ideological mission? Although no study can provide definitive answers to these comprehensive questions, continued research into the experiences of Aryan women in Nazi Germany can certainly provide new fertile ground in the well-tilled historical field of Nazi Germany, and at the very least give women (as historical subjects and historians) a greater say in what can and should be grown there.

⁶⁵ Eric A. Johnson & Karl-Heinz Reuband, *What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany, An Oral History* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2005).

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