

*I would call this instead
"The Battle for Births in
the Third Reich"*

**Stamm-Mutter
(Mother of the Race):
Sterilization and Motherhood
in the Third Reich**

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The soil provides the food, the woman supplies the population,
and the men make the action.
-- *anonymous Nazi historian*

The pioneers [of feminism] have grown tired because they see that they cannot storm
the bastions alone and because they have had to wait too long for help, for a
push from society at large... Bobbed hairdos and short skirts have beaten a
retreat... the ideology of the new womanliness hangs... flat as yesterday's
balloon.
-- *Alice Rühle-Gerstel, 1933*

It is no degradation of woman that she should be a mother:
that is her highest exaltation.
-- *Adolf Hitler*

Because the Nazi treatment of the Jewish population of Europe was so atrocious, their oppression or repression of other groups pales by comparison. The Nazis treated women, homosexuals, criminals, mental incompetents, racial inferiors, Roma and Sinti, and others to persecution, prosecution, incarceration, and execution – but not to the same degree as the Jews. The Nazis did not evenly levy their policies on the population of occupied Europe, nor were they entirely consistent at home, especially during the years World War II raged across the continent.

The government of Germany after World War I, commonly called the Weimar Republic, was of a more liberal ^{persuasion} construct than the imperial, pre-war government of Wilhem II. Many of the things the Nazis would speak out against – modern art, jazz music, feminism, the use of cosmetics, and fashionable clothing among them – spent a fruitful childhood in Germany during the interwar years. The basic concepts of German family life and motherhood took on new meanings and new interpretations during this time. The Nazis especially tied motherhood and the family to nationalism, creating a sense of racial urgency that necessitated the establishment and propagation of proper Aryan families on which to base the future German nation.

German women bore a large part of the responsibility for the construction of proper German families the Reich could depend on in the future. The stereotypes of men and women the Nazis held – and many other Germans as well – worked together with marriage restrictions and inducements, sterilization policies, and attitudes on how German mothers should raise their children to create a policy against children, or antinatalism, in the Third Reich. The Nazis regulated the humanity out of motherhood, turning babies into another war-time economy to be nationalized and strictly controlled.

Nazi attitudes toward women in general were reactionary; that is, the Nazis were very much against the Weimar Republic's liberal policies toward women.¹ Weimar gave women the right to vote in 1918. In addition, the Weimar constitution provided equal rights for women.² The Nazis – who never bothered to repeal the Weimar constitution -- restricted many rights women had, including what occupations they could hold. Hitler said that women participating in politics, whether voting or holding office, "demeaned the female nature."³ Hitler and the Nazi party worked diligently to remove the rights of women and the dignity of motherhood, all the while claiming to liberate women. The sadness of it is that many women supported Hitler and believed his family values rhetoric.

Before World War I, women had fewer liberties than during Weimar. However, more women worked and birth control was both more effective and more widely available.⁴ During the Great War, women's independence increased since the wartime economy needed them to staff factories; they still had to take care of their families, though.⁵ After the war ended, birth rates continued their downward trend as the German economy suffered in defeat and, at the end of the 1920s, in the worldwide Great Depression. These falling birth rates alarmed the Nazis and they tried hard to

¹ Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism 1919-1945: A Documentary Reader* (Volume 2, State, Economy, and Society 1933-39). (Exeter, England: University of Exeter Press, 1984), p. 448.

² Irene Stoehr, "Housework and motherhood: debates and policies in the women's movement in Imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic," in Gisela Bock and Pat Thane (eds.), *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880s-1950s*. (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 226-27.

³ Quoted in Jill Stephenson, "The Wary Response of Women," in Allan Mitchell, ed., *The Nazi Revolution*. (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath & Co., 1990), p. 168-9.

⁴ Stephenson, p. 167.

⁵ Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, Vol. 1 1987, Vol. 2 1989), p. 1:80.

increase the number of babies being born in Germany.⁶ Heinrich Himmler, head of the *Schutzstaffel* (SS), ^{was} ~~obsessed over~~ ^{with} raising the birth rate in Germany – as long as the children were racially pure.⁷ To keep the race pure, the Nazis tried inducements for young people to marry, tax breaks, and cash grants for racially pure couples with children. To prevent racially unacceptable men and women from reproducing, the Nazis adopted sterilization practices.

Hitler's concepts of men and women did much to reinforce the gender biases that kept women under control. He spoke in firm, bold words when describing men but resorted to ambiguities and abstractions when speaking about women. An example of this duality emerged in one of his many speeches in Nuremberg:

Woman has always respected the courageous, bold, determined man, and Man has always admired and been drawn towards the womanly woman...Man and Woman represent two quite different characteristics: in Man the understanding is dominant, but more stable than that is emotion, which is the mark of Woman.⁸

Hitler did manage a back-handed compliment to women by stating that emotion is more stable than understanding; Nazi policies, however, favor reason (understanding) over emotion. A good Nazi loved his mother – returned her emotion – but honored and respected his father – obeyed him – because his mother was ruled not by abstract reason like his father, but by an overwhelming desire to be dominated by a strong, able commander of a man.⁹ Nazi propaganda in the 1920s and 1930s did much to reinforce

⁶ According to statistics from Noakes & Pridham (p. 450), the birth rate in Germany fell 45% between 1900 and 1925 (2 million to 1.3 million) and another 25.4% by 1933 (to 971,000, an overall loss of 51.5%). In 1910, there were 128 live births per 1,000 women aged 15 to 50; the number fell to 80 in 1925 and only 59 in 1933 (an overall drop of 53.9%).

⁷ George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe*. (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985), pp. 166-67.

⁸ Hitler's 13 Sep. 1935 Parteitag speech in Nuremberg. Norman Baynes, *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler*. (New York: Howard Fertig, 1969), p. 531. All Parteitag speeches were in Nuremberg unless otherwise noted.

⁹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), pp. 18, 42.

their view of a woman's place.¹⁰ In another speech, Hitler said he did not "think it is proper if a woman invades the world of the man,"¹¹ further supporting both his other speeches and Nazi propaganda.

Hitler repeated these sentiments throughout *Mein Kampf* and his speeches, consigning his gender biases to immortality. For Hitler, the only acceptable education for women taught them how to be mothers, housewives, and nurse-maids. He constantly equated women with weakness – stating that Germany could do without a "peace supported... by the palm branches of tearful, pacifistic female mourners."¹² He symbolized men, on the other hand, as strong, fearless, and dutiful warriors. Hitler's army would train real men who "had lost the softness of youth and achieved bodies hard as steel," could "stand all weathers," and were upright, brave, and honorable.¹³ He called on men to be heroic in war but expected a woman's only struggle to be raising her children.¹⁴

Hitler's gender biases were apparent in Nazi policies on motherhood and compulsory sterilization. Hitler wanted the Reich's youth to marry sooner, partly to begin producing children, but also to aid in their health. He believed that earlier marriages would, for men, solve the problems of prostitution and the spread of syphilis; for women, an earlier marriage was conducive to having children, which would prevent

¹⁰ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), pp. 12-13.

¹¹ Hitler's Sep. 1934 Parteitag speech. Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz (eds.), *Inside Hitler's Germany: A Documentary History of the Third Reich*. (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992), p. 262.

¹² Hitler, pp. 281, 396, 487.

¹³ Hitler's 13 Sep. 1935 Parteitag speech. Baynes, p. 532. Also, a speech the following day to the Hitler Youth. Baynes, p. 542.

¹⁴ Hitler's Sep. 1934 Parteitag speech. Sax & Kuntz, p. 262.

hysteria and other illnesses.¹⁵ Also, early marriages would theoretically produce children for the Reich more quickly.

The Nazis established compulsory sterilization on 14 July 1933 with a law designed to remove "biologically inferior hereditary material" from the collective German gene pool.¹⁶ However, this law was secret until August, partly to fend off criticism from the Catholic Church.¹⁷ At particular risk were the "innumerable inferior and hereditarily tainted" Germans, whether they be Jew or Gentile. Only one month before, Minister of the Interior Wilhelm Frick stated Germany's "cultural and ethnic decline" was a direct result of the procreation of the twelve million people with "hereditary physical and mental" infirmities – about twenty percent of the population. Frick's intention was to "prevent the procreation of the hereditarily unfit."¹⁸

Between 1933 and 1945, German doctors sterilized approximately 1.5 million people. Again, Nazi racial and gender biases affected the numbers subjected to this treatment. On the surface, the policy was fair, since the number of sterilizations split almost evenly between men and women. However, one of the reasons for sterilizing a woman was having more than one illegitimate child, whereas illegitimate children produced in any number by racially acceptable Germans went unpunished. Women were also nearly seventy percent more likely to be sterilized for "feeble-mindedness" than men.¹⁹ Nazi officials did not choose these people at random; 205 Eugenics Courts

¹⁵ Hitler, p. 251 and Mosse, p. 161.

¹⁶ The law was titled "Law for the Prevention of Progeny with Hereditary Diseases."

¹⁷ Claudia Koonz, "Ethical Dilemmas and Nazi Eugenics: Single-Issue Dissent in Religious Contexts," *Journal of Modern History*. Vol. 64 (Dec. 1992 Supplement), p. S13.

¹⁸ Gisela Bock, "Antinatalism, maternity, and paternity in National Socialist racism," in Bock & Thane, pp. 235.

¹⁹ Bock, p. 235-36. Two-thirds of the 1.5 million sterilized were feeble-minded. Two-thirds of that number, or 600,000, were women.

started singling out victims for the sterilization doctors later in 1933. By the end of 1935 – after only about eighteen months of operation – the eugenics courts had asked for 100,000 sterilizations.²⁰

The other reasons for sterilization were similarly ambiguous, though not all of them were as non-specific as feeble-mindedness. The Nazis wanted to prevent children that would suffer from hereditary afflictions, because those children would be of no use to the Reich. The reasons revolved largely around mental conditions, such as "congenital feeble-mindedness," schizophrenia, and manic depression. Also included as basis for sterilization were hereditary deafness or blindness, serious physical defects, chronic alcoholism, biological depravity, repeated criminal convictions, and having an asocial nature. Many of these conditions were not known to be hereditary at the time, however, and others were ambiguous enough to allow for flexibility of enforcement.²¹

In 1935 two amendments to the original sterilization law outlawed voluntary sterilization and re-legalized abortion – outlawed since 1933 – only for reasons of racial hygiene. The Nazis had to bring back abortion because some women scheduled for sterilization engaged in "protest pregnancies" to avoid the procedure.²² As a result of the sterilization laws, the Nazis sterilized approximately 1.5 million people between

²⁰ Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, p. 189. Of the 100,000 requests, 55,900 were fulfilled by the end of 1935, 28,000 on women.

²¹ Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933-1945*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 136-37. Also Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life*. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 215, 217-18.

²² Bock, pp. 235, 238.

1933 and 1945 – 320,000 of them by 1939.²³ The paradox inherent in the sterilization policy was that the Nazis steadily undermined their proclaimed desire to increase the birth rate with increasingly restrictive regulations. Furthermore, they established a racial and gender paradox in that Hitler urged the German population to procreate, yet the reality of policy led to the forced sterilization of over a million people. Sterilization was another attempt to purify the race, along with deportation and mass murder, but it did not significantly effect the overall birth rate of Germany. Nazi attitudes towards mothers and motherhood did more to limit the birth-rate increase than any other factor.

The Nazis expected German women to bear children and raise them as good National Socialists. The woman's world was her husband, children, and household; Hitler stressed that the larger world of men was built upon this smaller world of women.²⁴ A good National Socialist woman was "directed toward the physical and spiritual task of motherhood" above all other tasks – motherhood subordinated even the woman's employment opportunities.²⁵ Even women's organizations taught that the German woman must devote herself solely to her family – her parents and siblings if not her husband and children.²⁶

Hitler wrote "the goal of female education must invariably be the future mother;"²⁷ this shows that, while attempting to severely limit the education available to women, the Nazis did not totally exclude women from educational opportunities. To

²³ Bock, p. 235 and Burleigh & Wippermann, p. 253. By comparison, thirty states in the US sterilized 11,000 people in the first thirty years of the 20th century.

²⁴ Hitler's Sep. 1934 Parteitag speech. Sax & Kuntz, p. 262.

²⁵ From the *Party Guide for the National Socialist Women's League*. Sax & Kuntz, pp. 264-65.

²⁶ From *The Organization, Tasks, and Duties of the National Socialist Womanhood*, published on 11 Jan. 1933 by Dr. Krummacher, Reich Leader of the NSF and leader of the Deutsche Frauenwerk (DFW). Noakes & Pridham, p. 461.

²⁷ Hitler, p. 414.

reinforce the gender barriers, Hitler wanted children – male and female – to learn to be what the Reich expected them to be in the future.²⁸ He wanted German mothers to behave as his mother did, in total devotion to the children; only through total devotion would Germany win the "struggle for the soul of the child."²⁹ Women were responsible for "giving life to healthy children... and creating a home for them which represent[ed] a place where nationalist and radicalist culture [was] nurtured."³⁰

Motherhood was one of the few acceptable "natural duties" for women. The limited number and scope of these natural duties bolstered the Nazi belief that women were neither equal to nor inferior to men, but rather different enough to warrant exclusion from the majority of official functions, offices, and policy-making.³¹ By stressing the importance of motherhood, the Nazis instilled a sense that a German woman's highest duty was to maintain the purity of Aryan blood; the embodiment of this duty lay in the women of the countryside and the farmlands, as they often had large extended families with many children.³²

Between Hitler and Himmler, the Nazi view of women and mothers is clear. Himmler, obsessed with increasing the birth rate, viewed women, including his wife Margaret, as either children in need of scolding, punishment, and protection; as wives who supported husbands without limitations; or elevated like a goddess, to worship

²⁸ Hitler's 18 June 1933 speech in Erfurt to the Hitler Youth. Baynes, p. 538.

²⁹ Hitler, pp. 4, 12.

³⁰ Excerpt from a "contemporary publication." Noakes & Pridham, p. 455.

³¹ Noakes & Pridham, p. 448. The "natural occupations" which the Nazis encouraged women to seek were nurse, teacher, house-maid, welfare services, and jobs in consumer goods industries like textiles or food preparation (p. 463)

³² Jost Hermand, "All Power to the Women: Nazi Concepts of Matriarchy," *Journal of Contemporary History*. Vol. 19 (1984), p. 662.

their beauty and draw strength from their presence.³³ Himmler, as a Catholic, probably also held the Virgin Mary as his idealized woman – many Catholic men do; that symbol of femaleness and motherhood likely skewed his view of normal, Earthly women although there is no documentation to prove this.

Hitler, on the other hand, left quite a bit of documentation on his attitudes towards women and mothers. Women needed training as wives, nurses, and mothers, both to protect the health of the Reich's children and to support unconditionally the men of Germany – to be "the truest companions on the journey" of a man's life.³⁴ Hitler's ideal woman found her true calling in marriage as a mother, what he called a woman's "highest exaltation."³⁵ He believed women to be ruled by emotion, unable to reason abstractly, willing to be dominated by a man, and insisted that German women be long-suffering and stoic in the face of war, so as not to depress the men to the point that they became useless as warriors.³⁶ German society detested the modern woman, emancipated and participant in the public sphere and blamed her along with Jews for the degeneracy, decline, and moral corruptness of Germany and the rise of Bolshevism.³⁷ Through strict control over employment opportunities and endless propaganda on the woman's traditional role, the Nazis kept women out of the public sphere almost completely. Indeed, during the Third Reich, only four women grew to national importance: Magda Göbbles, wife of propaganda genius Joseph, Leni Riefenstahl, an actress-turned-director that produced *Triumph of the Will* and other epic

³³ Richard Breitman, *Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution*. (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1991), p. 13.

³⁴ Hitler, p. 409. Also Hitler's 10 Sep. 1937 Parteitag speech. Baynes p. 533.

³⁵ Hitler's 13 Sep. 1935 Parteitag speech. Baynes, p. 532.

³⁶ Hitler, pp. 42, 190. Also Hitler's 13 Sep. 1935 Parteitag speech. Baynes, p. 531.

propaganda films, Hannah Reitsch, the only female test pilot of the Reich, and Gertrude Scholtz-Klink, who led the eight million women in the Nazi Women's Bureau.³⁸

Nazi stereotypes served to downplay women's importance to both the nation and the war effort. Because they adhered to the concept that women needed to concentrate on family and the home, practice restraint, and learn discipline,³⁹ they were unable to significantly nationalize women and boost the birth rate through motivational techniques alone. Instead, the birth rate increased on its own, a function of more people marrying. However, the birth rate could be realistically expected to drop after about 1935, since the small number of children born during World War I would then be reaching marrying and child-bearing age.⁴⁰ Due to massive efforts of industrial production before and during the war, many people concentrated in the cities, where the average number of children was smaller than among rural families. After the Soviets defeated the Nazi war machine in February 1943 after the lengthy battle for Stalingrad, Hitler finally abandoned his desire to keep women at home and mobilized women – no matter how many children they had – into the German war industries,⁴¹ thereby defeating the concepts of National Socialist motherhood he and others worked so hard to inject into the German national consciousness.

Ultimately for motherhood during the Third Reich, it is the rural woman who symbolizes the success of Nazi regulations and propaganda regarding the German family. The farm woman dedicated herself to her usually large family and the land –

³⁷ Matthew Stibbe, "Women and the Nazi State," *History Today*. Vol. 43 (Nov. 1993), p. 35.

³⁸ Stibbe, p. 38.

³⁹ Mosse, p. 160.

⁴⁰ Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Society*. (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1975), p. 39.

⁴¹ Stibbe, p. 39.

two of the major tenets of Nazi ideology.⁴² Since the farm was not touched by the debauchery of the city, the rural woman became the epitome of the ideal German woman for the Nazis – as long as she remained within the boundaries of what the Nazis considered racially acceptable.⁴³

The difficulties of farm life cast yet another shadow on Nazi policies toward women and motherhood and deepen the paradoxes of their system. While the city-dwelling wife might have been able to relinquish her job, the farm wife had no such luxury. She worked full-time on the farm and yet Hitler still expected her to bear Germany a large crop of children. In spite of Nazi attempts to segregate fully the spheres of women and men, women often ran the farms their husbands owned,⁴⁴ passively asserting an equality that was wholly dependent on their situation. Further denying the role of women on the farm as workers instead of only mothers, in 1933 the Nazis instituted a law restricting the inheritance of farmland to a single male heir – reinforcing their attempts to keep women out of business and the public sphere.⁴⁵ Even though the farm woman was the ultimate representation of the ideal National Socialist woman, the Nazis regulated even them into a marginal, biological, and familial role. Nazi policies and regulations did not significantly increase the birth rate on the German countryside – rural families, even under hardship conditions, stayed much the same as they had for the previous decades.

⁴² Clifford Lovin, "Farm Women in the Third Reich," *Agricultural History*. Vol. 60, no. 3 (Summer 1986), p. 108.

⁴³ Lovin, p. 106.

⁴⁴ Lovin, p. 109.

⁴⁵ Lovin, p. 113.

Hitler and the Nazi Party had some limited success in raising the birth rate in Germany during the years of the Third Reich (1933-1945). Helped to a small extent by outlawing birth control and abortions, most ^{other} Nazi policies had little effect on the birth rate. Compulsory sterilization policies obviously did not increase the birth rate, as the Nazis designed them specifically to prevent racially unacceptable people from reproducing. If they had sterilized more people, perhaps they would have achieved their goal of a purer race. However, the relatively small number of people sterilized – less than one percent of the population – did not have a significant effect on decreasing the number of racially undesirable people. Nazi attempts to alter artificially the birth rate in the Third Reich through mass sterilizations were unsuccessful.

very good paper
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