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Global History 12

23 March 2016

The Impact of Women in Nazi Germany

Throughout the beginning of the twentieth century, Germany saw a dramatic increase in female employment rates. However after 1933, during the rise of Nazi regime, new societal ideals were imposed that directly opposed this social trend. Out of fear of a decreasing population, women were usually reduced to working inside their homes, as caregivers and wives. Their main role in society was to bear and raise multiple children. To encourage this, the Nazi party created the 3 German Ks, 'children, kitchen and church' (Layton 71). This slogan, among other programs, were created and advertised to encourage the breeding of perfect, Aryan babies, ultimately to achieve Hitler's ideal German race (United States Holocaust Museum). However, not all women conformed to these standards. There were women who worked as office secretaries and were exposed to the crimes committed on a regular basis, nurses who played a key role in the euthanasia program, and women guards within the camps, which were known for their sadistic treatment of the prisoners. Majority of these women all contributed to the genocide and the other horrors taking place during the regime, just as the men during this time period.

According to Lower, secretaries were the second most essential to the effective operation of Hitler's genocidal war. It is estimated above ten thousand women went to work in offices of the East alone. Each day, these women would go to work, frequently alongside the guilty men themselves and sometimes even concealing their actions. These employees were usually young, as those raised inside the Nazi regime were considered to be more loyal and likely to follow the strict ideals. In 1942, there was a group of sixteen clerks stationed in Rivne, Ukraine, who witnessed first hand the murders of over 5 000 Jews in their town. These women realized the horror, but did not speak out against it, as they feared the

consequences (Lower 87). Each of them had to work hard to overcome the obstacles to be a woman in a high ranked, and working position; therefore they would not want to face the risk of losing their job. Despite the large quantity of female office workers, majority at this time were still confined to their home, so a secretary was considered privileged. Ilse Strwue claimed that she did nothing to prevent the genocide because she felt that the victims did nothing to fight against it. Routinely, she was exposed to evidence of the mass-killings, but grew accustomed to it. She, like many others in her field, was forced to desensitize herself to the horrors, to ensure that her primary job was executed (Lower 87-92). Much like the other workers in a job for the Nazi party, the secretaries took an oath of secrecy. After 66 years, Brunhilde Pomsel, the secretary of Hitler's propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbels, spoke out about her service. Despite despising Goebbels, Pomsel worked for him, facilitating his actions and keeping a record of them through his career. She stated that being transferred to work for an important man was an option she could not refuse, as she would face consequences. Even as a well respected secretary, she claimed to be uninformed of the magnitude of the atrocities and the killing (Nagorski). A similar situation occurred with Hitler's personal secretaries, but most notably, Traudl Junge. She was selected at the age of twenty-one to work beside him, so close that she was unaware of what he was capable of. Upon reflecting, she confessed to feeling guilty to have unknowingly served the man responsible for so many deaths, and she still regrets having assisted his operations (Hitler's Secretary). The female secretaries, whether they knew it or not, helped many men who contributed to the horrors within the regime. Without their assistance, a significant amount of the damage could not have been done.

Occasionally, the nurses did defend the victims, however this was not usually the case. Playing the most active role in the Nazi euthanasia program, they, alongside some male doctors and nurses, killed approximately 5 000 disabled citizens. This was, in Hitler's theory, to eliminate the genetic and financial burden that the disabled had on both the German society and state. The nurses were primarily responsible for injecting lethal doses of medications or leading patients into gas chambers. Often times, the nurses had been persuaded to believe that their

actions were merciful, as that is what they were told by their bosses. One former nurse, Luise Erdman, been raised and taught to listen to her superiors, therefore, she felt highly misguided. Professionals in her field throughout the euthanasia program had misinformed her, and she later stated "I was aware of the fact that a person was killed but I didn't see it as a murder but as a release" (Benedict). She, and other nurses, carried guilt throughout their lives from the events of the program, but in the moment, they feared the consequences of speaking out. They risked severe punishments, and would ultimately lose their job and source of income (Cohen-Arazi). "Thousands [of nurses] simply melted into the population, their deeds erased with the destruction of the files by the various institutions at war's end", which proves that many nurses went unnoticed in society, never convicted of the crimes they committed (Roland 204). That being said, nurses were not always guilty of causing unnecessary harm. One woman, Annette Schücking, was sent to Russia as a nurse and instructed to kill all the Jewish citizens that she encountered. This was to be done in the "purification" of Germany's future population, as Hitler planned on expanding the nation. Many of the women working there were doing it simply because they needed an opportunity to work, except this was not enough for Schücking. She refused to kill, and rallied her co-workers to do the same. They attempted to expose the injustices and would not support the actions of the killers (Lower 80). Typically in war times, nurses are the ones responsible for the saving of lives, yet this was harshly contrasted in this case. The nurses were amongst the deadliest of the killers, guilty of murdering thousands.

Frequently hiding behind their male counterparts, the women Nazi guards were found to be equally liable of torturous treatment toward concentration camp victims. It is estimated that amongst the thirty-three thousand SS guards, only approximately ten percent were women. They had usually been raised within the Nazi Regime, many attending the League of German Girls, which instilled the Nazi ideologies from a young age. Very little is known about women guards who showed signs of compassion inside the camps, except for one, Krüger. She was rumoured to have shared her food amongst the starving workers in the camp she oversaw, Ravensbrück (Wilmott). On the opposite end of the spectrum, was Irma Grese,

commonly referred to as the “Beast of Belsen”. Eventually sentenced to death, she was found guilty of committing numerous crimes against humanity (Roland). Witnesses claim that she would use her whip on the faces of good-looking women, in an attempt to destroy their beauty. She was also known for starving her dogs for when they were unleashed onto prisoners, shooting at the ones she did not like, and beating women until they collapsed (Wilmott). Similarly, Charlotte S would force women to stand still outside in the cold weather, and if someone moved, she would punish them by unleashing her dog. She trained it to brutally attack them, biting the genitals of her targets (Hall). Ilse Koch collected the tattooed skin of the dead prisoners, and used them for her homemade lampshades (Roland). Perhaps it was to prove themselves as equals to the men, but nevertheless, it is clear that the thousands of women guards working in the camps were going above and beyond to punish their victims much like their male coworkers.

Despite the common stereotypes of women in this time period as being wives and caregivers, it is evident that they did not apply to all women. Where the majority of the contributors the genocide were men, women also played an essential role. Female secretaries worked alongside male officers to simplify their job, women consisted of the greater portion of the nurses at fault for the mercy killings of the Euthanasia Programme, and upwards of 3 300 women guards worked within the walls of concentration camps. Eliminating the women who worked for the Nazis, would mean thousands would not have been killed. It can be said that without their help, including those who stayed home to raise children, the Nazi Regime would not have been managed as proficiently as it was.

Word Count: 1702

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