

THE NAZI POLICY TOWARDS WOMEN

ICT Task:

EITHER

1. Editing

- Save a copy of this document in your own server.
- Now edit it down to a maximum of 1500 words (TOOLS > WORD COUNT) by
 - (a) CUTTING any bits out which you consider less important;
 - (B) PASTING these at the bottom of the document as footnotes (INSERT > REFERENCE > FOOTNOTE).

AND/OR

2. Summarising

- Produce a mindmap on one side of A4 summarising this pack.

Extended writing:

Use your edited pack to and any other sources available to you to answer the following question:

"How successful were Nazi policies towards women?"

TIP: Consider not only different areas of policy, but also different time periods. Conclude by highlighting essential contradictions in the policies studied.

INTRODUCTION: The anti-feminist backlash of the 1920s

- Modernisation in Germany (which meant more and more people living in cities, and more and more non-agricultural jobs) had caused women who wanted to live lives which were not simply those of wives and mothers to have increased opportunities. This caused a wail of disapproval from the Churches, the rural population and the centre-right parties. A decrease in the size of families, an increase in divorce, contraception and abortion, more prostitution and venereal disease and a decline in morality generally were all blamed on this.
- More practically there was a great deal of criticism of 'double earners' (married women with jobs) – especially when the Depression kicked in. The recession caused many women to lose their jobs, but actually the fact that they were cheaper than men helped to protect others. As a result 29% of men but only 11% of women lost their jobs during the Depression. This led to a campaign to sack 'double earners' which started in 1931 and was encouraged by the Brüning government. In May 1932 the Centre Party proposed a law against them, and this was taken up by the Nazis after Hitler became Chancellor.

IDEOLOGICAL: The Nazi attitude towards women

- Nazi leaders shared the general disapproval of modern women and argued that women were fitted by their nature to different roles from those of men (a belief not just held by the Nazis). They said that they respected women, who were not inferior, but that women should keep to their own roles, especially as wives and mothers.

POLITICAL: Role of women in the Party

- Women were banned from ordinary membership of the Nazi Party, and on principle from all leading positions. But the Party had affiliated organisations for women:

The NSF

In 1931 they brought all Nazi women's organisations together in the NS Frauenschaft (National Socialist Womanhood). This was intended to mobilise a mass female vote for the Nazi Party. This made it a kind of Nazi political female elite. But the Nazis also declared it was to promote the 'education and integration of all female forces for the good of the nation'.

The DFW

The Deutsches Frauenwerk (German Women's Enterprise) was created in September 1933. It absorbed ('co-ordinated') all the non-Nazi women's organisations which were allowed to continue. (Feminist, pacifist and socialist women's organisations were dissolved.) The DFW had a more practical aim than the NSF: it devoted its energies to training and supporting mothers, investigating more efficient housework, and so on. There were various branches, including

- (a) the **Reich Mothers' Service**, which provided courses on motherhood and housework.
- (b) the **Domestic Science Department**, which advised women on how to overcome the problem of shortages by 'thrifty recipes, an emphasis on bottling and preserving, and encouraging people to gather wild nuts and fruits in the countryside'.

Assessment

- Both organisations had very large memberships – nearly 6m for the DFW and 2.3m for the NSF.
- The Reich Mothers' Service had put on 100,000 courses by March 1939, attended by 1.7m women in all. These very big organisations, of course, had large numbers of managers ('leaders'), some of them occupying very responsible positions; and of course these were women. (The NSF had by 1938 3500 full-time officials, 40,000 part-timers and 280,000 cell and block leaders, mostly unpaid.) To that extent women were not altogether excluded from power in the Third Reich.
- However, they were not listened to: Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, the leader of the NSF from 1934, 'had not yet once had the chance to discuss women's affairs in person with the Führer' by the end of 1938; and they had to face strong competition from other Nazi institutions like the Reich Food Estate (which wanted to organise farmers' wives) and the DAF (which organised working-class women). There was also competition from the girls' side of the Hitler Youth and especially the BDM.

ECONOMIC: Role of women in the labour market

The increase in the number of women who worked had led many Nazis to say that their main purpose was to stay at home, look after their husbands and bear large numbers of healthy children to increase the strength of the Volk. Therefore we might expect Hitler's government to forbid the employment of all women. It did not do so, for a number of reasons:

- It would have been very unpopular, and in the 'years of struggle' (i.e. before 1933) the Nazis needed votes. Even after that, it would have had very bad effects on public morale and possibly aroused serious opposition to Nazi rule.
- It would have had very bad effects on the economy.
- After about 1936, shortages of labour meant that women were actually encouraged into work.

The early period

- Even before 1933 (contrary to the Weimar constitution) some women in senior positions were sacked; and the payment of women less than men for the same work was made legal. The Nazis extended this policy to state and local government.
- Hitler prohibited the employment of women as judges and limited the number of women going into universities to 10%.
- Girls under 18 were made to serve 12 months as living-in domestic servants (without pay).
- The marriage loan law was also intended to tempt women out of employment – you could only get it if the wife promised to give up her job.

Assessment

All this was accompanied by a low level of women's employment during the first years of recovery in 1933-6. It is not clear, however, that it had much to do with anything the Nazis did. The recovery was mainly in industries which did not employ many women (i.e. construction and heavy industry).

After 1936

This is the period when unemployment dropped to the level where serious labour shortages appeared. The government was seriously worried about this and it affected their attitude towards women in employment.

- A series of new laws removed many of the restrictions (e.g. women did not have to promise to give up their jobs in order to get marriage loans: which made marriage loans much more popular).
- In early 1938 a law made it compulsory for all unmarried women under 25 to do a 'duty year' before they could take up jobs of their choice. This meant doing work in agriculture or as domestic servants. By 1940 there were 200,000 women doing a duty year.

Assessment

In the years after 1936 the number of women in employment began to increase again, but did not reach the levels of the late 1920s, perhaps because after the recession the number of young women getting married had increased. However the proportion of women in the wage-paid workforce had increased to a third by 1939 (7m). The increase included some women entering professions, e.g. some became doctors.

Overall assessment

• Whereas the regime wanted to emphasise a role for women which was more focused on community and family and less on politics and the wider world, in fact many things it did had the opposite effect. In particular, labour service, the 'duty year' and later the encouragement of women's employment all had the effect of broadening women's experience and making them less likely to be limited in the way the regime said it wanted. Some historians claim that the increase in women's employment was just temporary, and that if the Nazis had won the war they would have returned to their efforts to confine women within the family. This may be true, but it seems possible to doubt that they would have succeeded. The genie was definitely out of the bottle.

SOCIAL: The role of women in the family.

Before 1933

- After World War I there was a lot of alarmist talk, especially on the right, about the decline of the family and the likely effect this would have on the nation. This related to a decline in the birth rate (3.3% in 1900 [birth rates are normally counted as a proportion of the whole population], about 2.0% in the 1920s, and down to 1.5% by 1933)¹.
- This tendency was temporarily increased by the recession after 1929, as couples will also avoid having children at times of economic difficulty, and quite a number of young people were unable to set up independent households because of unemployment.
- Nationalists expressed anxiety about the effect this would have on the strength of the Reich.
- Conservatives of all sorts (including religious groups) tended to blame a decline in the number and size of families and call for a restoration of old-fashioned family values (by which they meant less sex outside marriage, more people getting married and more married couples having large families).
- The Nazis referred to the family as the 'germ cell of the nation' (i.e. where it reproduces itself) and called for measures to increase the birth rate.

Nazi policies from 1933

Increasing the number of children

For the first few years this ran in the same direction as their need to reduce unemployment. They took various measures to achieve this.

(a) Financial inducements:

¹ This was a natural development, related to modernisation, and happened in other European states as well (e.g. the British birth rate declined from 2.8 to 1.6 between 1900 and 1931). Better education and greater availability of things to buy, plus probably urbanisation and less child labour, all mean that couples reduce the number of children they have in favour of a higher standard of living.

- **Marriage loans:** These were introduced in June 1933. Couples could have a loan of 1000RM to spend on household goods provided that the woman agreed to give up her job. Each child born knocked a quarter off the debt.
- **Various other benefits** – tax allowances for children, paid for by extra taxes on the unmarried; maternity allowances, and concessions on all sorts of things like rail fares, school fees and shopping.
- **Child subsidies:** These were introduced in 1935, and involved poor parents with large families (at least four children under 16) getting grants (e.g. 1800RM for farm families) to spend on household goods. They were also used for other purposes (e.g. to persuade farm families not to leave the land).
- **Child allowances** (introduced in 1938) of 10RM per month for 3rd and 4th children, 10RM for 5th and subsequent.

(b) Flattery:

• All sorts of propaganda methods were used to try to make women feel good about having large families. Women with large families were awarded the Honour Cross of the Mother. It was presented on Hitler's mother's birthday (12th August). You got bronze if you had more than four children, silver if more than six and gold if more than eight. Hitler Youth members had to salute wearers of the Cross in public.

Ensuring only healthy Aryan children

This involved the use of **eugenics**: a science supposed to show how to improve the race by improving its gene pool. Although the Nazis wanted big families they were not interested in children as such, but only useful additions to the Volk. Accordingly they wanted to prevent children being born who might weaken the race. They also feared that large families were a sign of irresponsibility, which in turn they thought would be a sign of racial inferiority. Accordingly

- they made it impossible to get married unless you could prove that you were both Aryan (which meant collecting endless documents about your ancestors) and healthy.
- young people thinking about getting married were taught the 'Ten Commandments for the Choice of a Spouse' to encourage them to select their marriage partner on good racial grounds;
- a Law for the Protection of the Hereditary Health of the German People (October 1935) banned marriage for anyone suffering from a serious infectious disease or hereditary illness;
- by a Law to Prevent Hereditarily Diseased Offspring (July 1933) you could be compulsorily sterilised if you were thought to be in danger of creating unhealthy children (and people who had been sterilised, or were otherwise infertile, were forbidden to marry) (and doctors and nurses were legally compelled to inform on you if they thought you qualified);
- the 'race defilement' laws made it illegal to marry (or have sex with) Jews; and
- there was a national eugenic register which listed separately 'decent' and 'asocial' large families.
- With encouragement from Himmler (who was an enthusiast on the subject of race) young girls were offered opportunities to have themselves made pregnant by selected SS men. The SS also ran homes for mothers (Lebensborn, or Spring of Life) where they could have the best conditions.

Preventing birth limitation

- **Pressure on birth control:** the laws against abortion were harshly enforced (and eventually the death penalty could be inflicted on doctors who carried out abortions); birth control advice clinics were closed down; and it was forbidden to advertise or distribute contraceptives.
- Similarly, **sterilisation** (unless ordered by the authorities) was illegal (unless you were non-Aryan, in which case it was quite OK).
- **All sorts of help for mothers** was provided – pre-natal and post-natal accommodation and creches; motherhood and housework classes and (later, during the war) foreign slave labourers in the home. This was regarded as especially important where the mother had a job, as nothing should endanger the child.
- **Pressure to break up barren marriages:** the divorce laws were changed in 1938 so that you could divorce your partner for infertility or refusal to have children. This led to about 30,000 extra divorces within two years.

- Both **prostitution** and **male homosexuality** were much more harshly prosecuted than before, and homosexuals were put in concentration camps and murdered in large numbers because they were not fulfilling their 'duty to procreate'.
- Illegitimacy was gradually seen as less and less disgraceful. Children were children whether their parents were married or not.
- Eventually at least some Nazis (e.g. Himmler) hoped to introduce polygamy [= having more than one wife] – at least for war heroes.

Making sure children were brought up as Nazis

- Mothers (and in fact parents) were endlessly indoctrinated on this point and a great deal of propaganda effort was spent on it, with posters of the ideal Aryan family, ideal German mother, etc: rather like building society advertisements today. The German women's organisations concerned themselves with training women to be good mothers and housewives but also with making sure women were ideologically pure.
- There was also the possibility that your children could be taken away from you if you were discovered not to be educating them properly.

Assessment

Increasing the number of children

- The birth rate did go up. It was 1.5% in 1932, and had risen to 1.8% by 1934 and 2% by 1939. One book talks about a 'baby boom [which] constituted a biological vote of confidence in the regime' [Grunberger: Social History of the Third Reich, p 300].
- However there are several problems with this:
 - The rate had previously (1928) been 1.8, so the Nazis only managed to raise it by 0.2. It was in any case inevitable that the birth rate would rise in a time of prosperity and rapid economic recovery – it always does. As soon as war broke out it fell again, and it rose again after the war (reaching 1.8 again in 1960).
 - An argument the other way was that there were several things which should have caused *fewer* births: e.g. shortage of houses (about 1.5m by 1939); labour service, military conscription and the increase in female employment after 1936, which all kept partners apart.

Ensuring only healthy Aryan children

- Victims of sterilisation were disproportionately from the poor sections of the population, or discharges from asylums. Procedures allowed 'bourgeois male physicians' to impose their own prejudices; e.g. 'socially feeble-minded' could mean failure to be 'monogamous, thrifty, clean, efficient, tidy, responsible and striving upwards' [Michael Burleigh].

Making sure children were brought up as Nazis

- Sons were taught, at school and in the Hitler Youth, that women were inferior. This caused complaints about young boys being arrogant with their mothers.
- The parents might be afraid of betrayal by their children. In extreme cases children might inform on their parents, and in any case parents would not be able to talk freely in their own homes at least until their children were old enough to see the need to keep quiet about what was said.
- Children were removed from the family for long periods, in the Hitler Youth, Labour Service, the girls' duty year and so on. Meanwhile parents also were likely to be called away by various Nazi organisations; women were more likely to have jobs in the late 1930s and hours were longer.

Overall Conclusion

- Children were removed from the family for long periods, in the Hitler Youth, Labour Service, the girls' duty year and so on. Meanwhile parents also were likely to be called away by various Nazi organisations; women were more likely to have jobs in the late 1930s and hours were longer.

- Nazi policies probably did not strengthen the family: on the contrary, they tried to take children out of the family and indoctrinate them independently of their parents, and in so doing caused problems within families.
- Nazi 'pro-natal' [aiming at more births] policies may have had a very slight effect in increasing the number of children born, but it is difficult to say how far this was simply caused by economic recovery.
- Nazi 'racial hygiene' policies caused enormous distress to a significant part of the population, and may have caused significant anxiety to many more.
- There may have been a general decline in concern about sexual morality. A senior civil servant (quoted by Grunberger, p 318) said in 1942 that 'It appears that most men count girls among the conventional pleasurable items of consumption such as beer and cigarettes. German girls in turn are nowadays credited with particularly little inhibition in sexual matters'. If there is any truth in this, the Nazis were not successful in improving the kind of sexual morals which had been widely criticised under Weimar. They were in fact dreadfully confused: partly they wanted to make sexual behaviour very restricted, but also partly they wanted many children to be born. They never managed to work out a firm answer to this problem.

How far can women be blamed for the Nazi regime?

Women have been accused of a number of things in connection with the Nazis:

• **Some historians have said that women voted the Nazis in.** In fact this is very difficult to establish, because we have very little information about how women voted in the crucial period (1929-33). Voting was secret. However, in a few towns women's and men's votes were counted separately, and the answer seems to have been that women did tend to vote right-wing more than left-wing. Many women supported parties like the Centre or the Nationalists. It may be because these parties had similar approaches to law and order, the family or religion. The Nazi Party was not very different from them. At first more men than women voted Nazi, but by March 1933 about an equal number of men and women voted for them. 'Existing studies of women in this period shed little light on why this should be so.' But in any case the story that women *particularly* voted for Hitler is a myth.

• It is also often implied that **women were fascinated by Hitler and became hysterical on occasions when he appeared in public.** The Nazis put great effort into propaganda films and photographs showing this, and women were always put into the front row when Hitler made public appearances. It is very difficult (if not impossible) to discover how much of this was simply propaganda.

Were women 'victims' or 'perpetrators'?

Similarly, there has been (and still is) intense debate about how far women (as opposed to men) can be blamed for the evils of the Nazi regime.

Women as victims

Women can be seen to have suffered during the Third Reich in that they

- lost senior jobs, were excluded from virtually all positions of power, had to accept lower rates of pay than men and had lower chances of higher education and poorer schooling;
- lost control of their own bodies with the regime's opposition to birth control;
- lost control of their families, even to the point where their children could be taken away if they did not conform to the regime;
- were more likely to be sterilised, and more likely to die as a result of the operation, than men; being more vulnerable to accusations of 'social feeble-mindedness' than men;
- were regarded and treated as inferiors, even by their own children in some cases. (Though in theory, Nazis claimed, women were *not* inferior, only different. But the supposed differences were such that they excluded them from serious consideration as powerful individuals outside the home.)

Women as innocents

- An obvious theory is that women inhabited (and in fact were forced back into) the private sphere, whereas the evil of Nazism was created in the public sphere. Therefore women were innocent of the evil.
- This is supported by those who say that the private sphere in the third Reich did not change much from what it had been before (whereas the public sphere did).

Women as collaborators

- Some historians do not agree. They say that
- not all women inhabited the private sphere – e.g. doctors, nurses, concentration camp guards, 'leaders' of the big Nazi women's organisations, teachers and so on inhabited, or at least partly lived in, the public sphere. In many cases they perpetrated evil there (as with the women guards who conducted 'death marches' – see chapter 13 of Daniel Goldhagen: Hitler's Willing Executioners; or with women who participated in the racial hygiene programme or assisted with sterilisations); or that
- the private sphere was invaded by the state to such an extent that it ceased to be private at all, so that things women did as wives and mothers can be blamed for the evil of Nazism – 'they comforted the SS men'. Invasion of the private sphere is in itself a controversy, but certainly the Nazi state did not wish to allow people privacy and took it away wherever it could.
- Many women educated their children in the National Socialist spirit. (But what would have happened to them if they did not? and how could we know if they did not?)

Conclusion

- Is there any point in arguing about gender? Is there any special way in which women were guilty which men were not? Or are differences in responsibility purely caused by the different roles men and women adopted? (Would a woman who joined the SS behave any differently from a man? Would a man who stayed at home and looked after children behave any differently from a woman?) It is true that gender roles were strongly emphasised in the Third Reich, but does this mean that individual people have to be treated primarily as either male or female?
- This is an area where many people feel very strongly (many women historians have studied it, and some of them have strong feminist opinions. Some also object equally strongly). Our own period is one in which pro- and anti-feminist arguments are pursued passionately. This makes it tempting to study Nazi Germany to prove a point. The fact is that we probably simply don't know enough.

Credits

The text of this pack is an abridged and redesigned version of the text which can be found at:
<http://www.ourcivilisation.com/smartboard/shop/festjc/chap21.htm>.