

Feminism under Fascism

In Germany of the 1930s

Ruchira Gupta¹



In speech after speech, the Nazis promised the restoration of the father's authority and the mother's responsibility within the family to Kinder, Küche, Kirche (Children, Kitchen and the Church).

German families had become much smaller, married women had gained the legal right to keep their own salaries, and both married and single women were joining the paid-labour force in record numbers. Women's dress and hair were both becoming shorter. Thirty-two women deputies were elected to the Reichstag (more than in the USA and UK at the time). Radical feminists had begun to organize against the protective legislation that kept women out of many jobs, and to work toward such international goals as demilitarization and pacifism.

Many believed that reinforcing the traditional roles of women and men in the family "would provide stability in a social world that seemed to be rapidly slipping from their control."

The Nazi Party gained rapid support among those social groups and classes where women had made the most headway in the 1920s, and where there was, in consequence, a measure of sexual competition for jobs during the depression. Nazi propaganda attacks on the 'degeneracy' of childless, educated, decorative city women who smoked and drank, struck some deep chords among humiliated and anxious German men preoccupied with their perceived loss of masculinity.

These men felt they could only regain their masculinity through militarism and emphasis on racial superiority. The purity of the blood, the numerical power of the German race, and the sexual vigour of its men thus became ideological Nazi goals: Its militarism was predicated upon overt male supremacy and its racialist ideology could only succeed by controlling women's procreative role.

An excerpt from the article. The full article can be accessed from the author.

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The place of women and the need for the authoritarian family was not just a popular campaign platform but became a reason for the growth of the Nazis. The anti-feminism of the movement was notorious and extreme.

This did not stop at rhetoric. It translated into policy. Women experienced the rapid erosion of their rights in every sphere. The Nazis kept their promises in the Nazi way.

- Women were told to give up their paid jobs for men. In an ingenious piece of social engineering, National Socialism gave interest-free loans to young couples provided that the woman withdrew from the labour market. Loan certificates were made over only to the husband.
- Inter-race and inter-religious marriages were banned. At the same time tax penalties were imposed on “Aryan” women for remaining single.
- Housing needs were almost totally neglected as was child care. The cost of welfare, even for the very families that the Nazis were idealizing, set against armaments expenditure, was trivial.
- Independent women were ruthlessly attacked and driven out of the public domain. For example, Toni Sender, a Member of Parliament, bearing the triple burden of being Jewish, a Social Democrat and a woman, was repeatedly called by Nationalists and Nazis, a high-class prostitute, who only donned proletarian clothes when she went to address workers’ meetings, during the violent election campaigns of 1932².
- Many feminists were jailed and some paid with their lives.
- Motherhood was glorified to the extent that infertility among married “Aryan” women was categorized as an illness and declared to be grounds for divorce. Contraception was prohibited. Women were jailed for having abortions. Grant preference were given to “Aryan” families with more than five children.
- 15-year old girls of the so-called Aryan race were sent to Lebensraums (hostels where they were raped by Hitler youth to give birth to blue-eyed blonde Nazi babies as part of massive attempts at Eugenics). As the promiscuity of the political leaders became public knowledge, and the divorce rate steadily rose, the Lebensraums also opened their doors for unwed or abandoned mothers of the “superior” race.
- Pregnant women were given training courses in the arts and sciences of motherhood and household management in Mother’s Schools. The courses conveyed the high political and social calling of the housewife and mother, stressed the crucial nature of her contribution to the future health and strength of the race, gave instruction in hygiene and baby-care, and pointed out the ways in which a shrewd and careful management of the family budget could help to ease the economic problems of the Reich, in particular the pressing shortage of foreign exchange- buying fish instead of meat, synthetic fats instead of butter, and clothes made from artificial fibers; cooking nutritious simple dishes, or eating a one-pot meal on Sundays.

The impact of these policies was devastating on women.

² One of the most distinguished victims of this type of vilification, Toni Sender, a member of the national parliament (Reichstag) who laboured bravely under the triple burden of being Jewish, a Social Democrat and a woman, has left a memorable account of the personal attacks on her by Nationalists and Nazis during the violent election campaigns of 1932. They culminated in the repeated assertion that she was a high-class prostitute who only donned proletarian clothes when she went to address workers’ meetings. In the poisoned atmosphere of the Nazi struggle for power there were few defences against this salacious campaign of defamation-the courts declined to convict those responsible.

Jobs

Over 1 million unemployed women workers lost their work insurance. About 300,000 women were removed from jobs every year. In 1933 for example, 15 per cent of teachers lost their jobs and 19,000 female civil servants were sacked. There was the massive degradation of teen-age girls and older women workers into the ranks of the family assistants i.e. to cook, babysit and clean for families with more than four children.

A decree stipulated that only men could be named to university posts. Physics researcher Lise Meitner, was thrown out of her job as Director of the Department of Physics at the Kaiser Wilhelm Society in 1939. Emmy Noether, another mathematician, was terminated from her post by virtue of the "German law for the Restoration of the Public Service" of April 7, 1933, for having been active in the 1920s in the USPD and the SPD and for being female.

Women were barred from government positions including judgeships. Not all women approved of Hitler's view of their role. Many of them were intellectuals – doctors, scientists, lawyers, judges, teachers, etc., who did not want to give up their jobs and stay at home. In protest against Hitler's anti-feminist policies they joined left-wing opposition groups. If caught they faced being sent to concentration camps as political prisoners. In October 1933, the first concentration camp for females was opened at Moringen, Germany. In 1938 a second camp for women was established at Lichtenburg and in 1939 a third at Ravensbruck.

Higher Education

Universities were viewed as hot spots for subversive activity by the Nazis because they were places that valued knowledge and promoted an environment that questioned authority. Women who entered universities often attained and spread anti-Nazi ideas. To prevent a much-feared woman's rebellion, all girls who exhibited "bluestocking" values were immediately and unquestionably removed from university life. Anyone even suspected of subverting the Nazi Regime, especially educators or their students, were fired or dismissed from school.

In 1933, school programmes for girls were changed to discourage them from pursuing university studies. The five years of Latin classes and three years of science were replaced by courses in German language and domestic skills training. Paul Giesler, a Nazi official and propagandist, began touring universities speaking against the high educational environment for women. Many students walked out during his speeches. One of the bravest, yet most tragic leaders was nineteen-year old Sophia Scholl, who started the White Rose Student Group in Munich in 1942. The group distributed pamphlets, degraded swastikas and painted anti-Hitler rhetoric such as "Hitler the Mass Murderer" or "Down with Hitler." On February 22, 1943 all of the White Rose members were imprisoned or expelled. Sophia was executed. Finally, women were allowed only 11 per cent of university places.

Censorship

The most effective tool, specifically for women, lay in the power of speech or gossip. Cut off from jobs and education, women began to talk amongst themselves against Hitler's policies. This dominant infraction bothered the Nazis so much that they passed the Heimtuck Egesetz or Law Against Malicious Gossip. Violation of the law could be punished with death or imprisonment.

Banning of Inter-religious and inter-race marriages

The Protection of German Blood and German Honour Act, enacted on 15 September 1935, forbade marriage and extramarital sexual relations between persons racially regarded as Aryans (persons of “German or related blood) and non-Aryans (Jewish Germans and Gentile Germans of Jewish descent and later extended to «Gypsies, Negroes or their bastard offspring). During the war, repeated efforts were made to propagate Volkstum (racial consciousness). Nazi propaganda published pamphlets that enjoined all German women to avoid sexual relations with all foreign workers.

German women accused of racial defilement were paraded through the streets with a shaved head and placard around her neck detailing her crime. Those convicted were sent to a concentration camp. In 1933, when the Nazis assumed power, there were about 35,000 mixed marriages in Germany, by the end of 1944 about 12,000.

Status of single and independent women

Under the Weimar Republic, the constitution guaranteed equality between the sexes. The state encouraged a family wage, legislative protection and insurance benefits were given to pregnant women wage-earners, family planning clinics and day nurseries were established to encourage women to reconcile family and work, modern methods of birth-control were promoted, and state sickness insurance scheme began to offer advice on contraception.

To the Nazis, Berlin become a threateningly large wilderness of sterile promiscuity, hedonism, degeneracy and unnatural progress. In 1933, the National Sozialistischer Betriebs Obman, proclaimed that women “painted and powdered were forbidden at all meetings of the NSBO. Women who smoked in public – in hotels, cafés, in the street and so on – will be excluded from NSBO”.

The guidelines for being an ideal woman in Nazi Germany were as follows:

- Women should not work for a living
- Women should not wear trousers
- Women should not wear makeup
- Women should not wear high-heeled shoes
- Women should not dye or perm their hair
- Women should not go on slimming diets

Hitler said the “The slogan “Emancipation of Women” was invented by Jewish intellectuals.”

Women in politics

Doctrines of Nazism promoted exclusion of women from political life. The Nazi party decreed that “women could be admitted to neither the Party executive nor to the Administrative Committee”. It did allow women to become party members to support their “men” but gave them no decision-making power. Germany went from having 37 female Members of Parliament out of 577, to none, after the election of November 1933. Joseph Goebbels justified this position by explaining that “it is necessary to leave to men that which belongs to men.

Feminists

Nazi policies criminalized women's movements. They banned and condemned through propaganda and speeches the KPD (Marxist) and SPD (socialist) feminist groups first. Many of their members were arrested or assassinated, such as Libertas Schulze-Boysen, Mildred Harnack-Fish, Hilde Meisel or 20-year-old Sophie Scholl. Others, like Helen Stocker, an advocate of women's reproductive rights, Dora Schaul, a writer, or LidaGustava Heymann and Anita Augspurg, who had appealed to the Bavarian Interior Minister for expulsion of Hitler, on grounds sedition, were forced to live in exile. Their property was confiscated by Hitler.

Then under a programme called Gleichgeschaltet (coordination), National Socialism gained control over the moderate women's groups and then dismantled them. The majority of women associations, such as the BDF (Bund Deutscher Frauenverein), chose among themselves to disappear or disband. Nazi groups infiltrated the BDF's subsidiaries. By May 1934, the BDF lost its power and influence. The only way to save the organization from becoming a puppet of the Nazi Regime was to voluntarily dissolve the organization. The BDF was established in 1894 and disbanded in 1933.

The BDF's extinction symbolized the "anti-climatic end" that Nazis brought upon the organized feminist movement in Germany in the mid 1930's. Only one women's association persisted under the regime, Die Frau, or Woman, until 1944. It was placed under the guardianship of the Reich Minister of People's Education and of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels.

Some old liberal feminists worked with international organizations, especially pacifistic groups, such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) when World War II began. Others decided to wait until the Nazis fell, expecting, like most feminists in the Weimar Republic, that Hitler's rule would be a short, ineffectual phase. Socialist and Communist feminists assumed a revolution would occur against Hitler, leading most to wait in silence or being jailed and killed. Though the Nazi regime failed as a government, it succeeded for generations in silencing German women and, therefore, putting a hole into the feminist movement for decades.

Motherhood and Housework

The fall in the birth-rate under the Weimar Republic provoked a major ideological onslaught from the extreme right. Friedrich Burgderfer described the declining birth-rate as a 'bio-political struggle'. In a 1934 speech, Hitler claimed, "Our National Socialist Women's Movement has in reality but one single point, and that point is the child."

Abortion was prohibited. Women began to perform abortions on their own, reporting it as stillbirth. In 1943 the ministers of the Interior and Justice enacted the law "Protection of Marriage, Family and Motherhood", which made provisions for the death penalty for mothers convicted of foeticide.

Nazi propaganda machinery celebrated women's role as mother and housewife as being of supreme national importance. Drudgery, scrimping and saving, anxiety, self-abnegation and the highly constricted perspective of a life revolving around the household were hallowed by a never-ending stream of compliments from the country's political leaders.

The rigours of child-birth were translated through a frenetic vocabulary of adulation into an ideological experience worthy of quasi-religious reverence. A Cross of Honour of the

German Mother was given to women who brought into the world more than four children. In 1939, three million mothers were decorated on a newly created German Mothers' Day.

School textbooks like *The German Mother and Her First Baby*, and *Mother Tell me about Adolf Hitler*, were distributed teaching young women to train their children in Nazi values:

You, Fritz and Hermann, must only be German boys who fill their place in the Hitler Youth, and later become capable and courageous German men so that you will be worthy to have Adolf Hitler for your [Führer](#). You Gertrude, must be a proper German girl, a real BDM girl and later a proper German wife and mother, so that you also are able to look the Führer in the eyes. [Liselotte Herrmann](#) was the first German mother to suffer the death penalty under the regime. Housing needs were almost totally neglected as was child care. Ironically, the nightmare world of dictatorial government, huge industrial combines, all-encompassing administration and organized inhumanity was parasitic upon its ideological antithesis-the minute community of parents and children.

The cost of welfare, even for the very families that the Nazis were idealizing, set against armaments expenditure, was trivial. Feminists, who, through their own direct experience, could have informed policies that were friendlier to the family, domesticity and child-bearing were unfortunately in jail, exiled or dead. During this entire period, women, were told to keep silent by people they looked up to-fathers, husbands, political leaders. They were told it was not appropriate, or why raise uncomfortable questions, Hitler was trying to rebuild the nation, after all.

Next, a brief interview with German Sociologist Marianne Schmidbaur gives us an insight into the status of women in Germany today.



Feminism in the Germany of Today

Sociologist Marianne Schmidbaur is scientific director of the Centre for Gender Studies at the Goethe University Frankfurt. Interviewer: Friederike Bauer © www.deutschland.de

Ms Schmidbaur, what is the situation as regards political equality in Germany?

There is a female German Chancellor, but at the same time fewer women in the Bundestag. Indeed, just over 30 percent of parliamentarians in the Bundestag today are women, fewer than in the last legislative period when it was over 36 percent. A few years ago we also had three Länder minister presidents, now there are two. You can't simply assume that progress is inevitable.

Where does Germany rank by international comparison?

The International Parliamentary Union lists the percentage of women in parliaments worldwide. Germany is in the middle section of the table, in 46th position out of 190. Rwanda is in first place. Of course, this is only one indicator among many, but overall, in my opinion, a medium position is about accurate.

What would need to happen for Germany to move forward?

The political parties are something like the gatekeepers for representation in the parliaments. We therefore need a quota for lists of candidates. Evidently nothing will happen without one. In France, men and women must be equally represented on electoral lists. If this is not the case, either the list will not be accepted, or the party must fear having its grant reduced. We should follow this example.

Does the word feminism have a negative connotation in Germany?

For a long time, feminism was equated with hostility towards men. It was therefore regarded as outdated. This has changed in the meantime.

Today, young people are discovering that they can't fulfil their life models, that they can't achieve a fair and equal division of labour between the sexes in family and career. Yet that is exactly what the majority want. Feminism now has a different sound as a result.

So there's a more pragmatic view of feminism?

To some extent, yes. It's about equality in everyday life. Men, too, today no longer want to be limited to being the breadwinner. Is the new feminism continuing the tradition of the early women's movement? Research speaks of three waves of feminism. The first fought for women's right to vote and was organized in societies and groups. The second in the 1960s and 1970s fought for new freedoms and equal rights before the law; it consisted mainly of extra-parliamentary groups. Today, it is about living conditions, including the fight against sexual violence. The campaigns play out mainly on the internet and are more international than in the past.

In other words, feminism lives on – also in Germany?

Definitely. However, we must remain alert and active, otherwise there is a danger of setbacks. Not only in Germany are parties representing very traditional role models getting stronger. We need to nip these beginnings in the bud.