

Mothers of the Race: The Glorification of Motherhood, Racial Purity and Compulsory Sterilisation Under the Third Reich

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Adolf Hitler's Third Reich barred women from self-determination by controlling their reproduction; although Western democracies heavily condemned these actions, they continue to enact policies that emulate fascist tyranny. In Nazi ideology, women appeared as mothers, either hailed as "mothers of the race" or branded "race traitors" who were guilty of "racial degradation."¹ Between 1933 and 1939, the Nazi Party ran an aggressive eugenics campaign utilizing the full force of a terrorist state to carry out oppressive policies that drove the prohibition of abortion alongside compulsory sterilization and compulsory motherhood alongside its prohibition. Twin aims of "eliminating male unemployment and creating an Aryan nation, dictated motherhood and domesticity for all 'racially pure' women," while subjecting 'racially-inferior' women to horrific acts of eugenics.² What resulted was the successful segregation and oppression of women through two sides of a coherent policy of sexism and racism.³

The transition from the Weimar Republic to Hitler's Third Reich was not a "case of white to black, rather a shift in shades of grey;" by the time Hitler came to power, there had already been well over a decade of intense controversy in Germany surrounding eugenics, sterilization, and abortion.⁴ ⁵ The Weimar Republic inherited the consequences of the First World War; many men had been killed, women were working outside the home, and there was a housing shortage. The lack of men made it difficult for women to marry, even if they were able to marry, the housing shortage made it difficult to raise children.⁶ In the case of women who already had children, most

¹ Giselle Bock, "Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization, and the State," *Signs* 8, no. 3 (1983): 401.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173945?searchText=&searchUri=&ab_segments=&searchKey=&refreqid=fas
tly-default%3Aa91db5d944422bc547eb5407c3152283

² Michelle Mouton.. "From Adventure and Advancement to Derailment and Demotion: Effects of Nazi Gender Policy on Women's Careers and Lives," *Journal of Social History* 43, no. 4 (2010): 945.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/40802012?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

³ Charu Gupta, "Politics of Gender," 41.

⁴ John Hunt, "Perfecting Humankind: A Comparison of Progressive and Nazi Views on Eugenics, Sterilization and Abortion," *The Linacre Quarterly* 66, no.1 (1999): 31 10.1080/20508549.1999.11877527.

⁵ John Hunt, "Perfecting Humankind," 33.

⁶ John Hunt, "Perfecting Humankind," 31.

of whom were working mothers, having more jeopardized the economic security of their families and their health. In an attempt to combat these issues, Weimar turned to family policy with the use of various social welfare programs, many of which were later utilized by the Nazis. These programs included tax benefits, maternity leave, and increased maternal healthcare; however, “the incentives given often excluded certain groups of women, and working women could not feasibly partake in all aspects of the programs because of working-class lifestyles and financial concerns.”⁷ Due to deteriorating conditions and failed policies, the demand for abortions was at an all-time high. In 1926, Hamburg reported approximately two abortions per three live births, and in Berlin, abortions exceeded live births. Despite the legal repercussions and safety concerns of obtaining an illegal abortion, the demand continued to increase.⁸

The language and concepts of eugenics and forced sterilization were well rooted in “even the most progressive Weimar social health and welfare initiatives.”⁹ In 1928, ministry officials at the Department of Health held secret talks with prominent racial thinkers in Germany, “in which they discussed the possibilities of forced sterilization and the killing of people with [psychiatric disabilities, psychiatric illnesses, emotional disorders, or mental disabilities], among other issues.”¹⁰ This is not to say that the Weimar Republic was as brutal as Hitler’s Third Reich. To “talk of sterilization, even to perform the procedure, or consider the possibility of coercive sterilization,” is not the same as to practice it with the full force of “the medical, legal, and police power in a terrorist state.”¹¹ Nevertheless, the Weimar Republic established the framework for the Nazi’s harrowing policies.

Under the Third Reich, the state of reproductive healthcare deteriorated at an alarming rate, a direct result of the increasingly strict and punitive eugenics policies enacted. These policies addressed two issues: in 1933 the birth rate in Germany was well below replacement level at 0.71, and the regime’s racial ideology as they worried their “Nordic race was doomed to extinction.”¹²

⁷ Katelyn M. Quirin, "Working Women and Motherhood: Failures of the Weimar Republic's Family Policies," *The Gettysburg Historical Journal* 3, no. 8 (2014): 73.

<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1123&context=ghj>

⁸ Henry P. David, , Jochen Fleischhacker, and Charlotte Hohn. “Abortion and Eugenics in Nazi Germany,” *Population and Development Review* 14, no. 1 (1988): 84. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1972501>

⁹ John Hunt, “Perfecting Humankind,” 34.

¹⁰ John Hunt, “Perfecting Humankind,” 31.

¹¹ John Hunt, “Perfecting Humankind,” 34.

¹² Henry P David, “Abortion and Eugenics in Nazi Germany,” 88.

The Nazis attributed the dangerous decline in the birthrate to the “poisonous atmosphere of the liberal era.”¹³ They argued feminism had “convinced women that motherhood was beneath their dignity,” so women had begun to use birth control and have abortions; thus, a woman’s “biological” role took on heightened importance.¹⁴ The Nazis implemented the policies with the goal of stopping the “racial deterioration and decomposition of the German Volk” and did so by preventing abortions for those with “ostensible hereditary worth,” and sterilizing those who posed a threat to the ‘Volk’ by passing on “hereditary forms of inferiority.”¹⁵

Racial purity, “numerical power,” and the “rigour of the race” were ideological goals of such high priority that all women’s activities other than “breeding” became of secondary significance in party rhetoric.¹⁶ German women had to be convinced these policies were not to demean them, but rather to “restore the natural order” to accord women the “respect and honour” they deserved as mothers and housewives, as stated by early Nazi Party leader Gregor Strasser.¹⁷ As previously discussed, women were not as emancipated under the Weimar Republic as one might assume; thus, Hitler’s views had an appeal to them. Claudia Koonz provides a compelling explanation of this support in her book *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, The Family, and Nazi Politics*; she states: “The enthusiasm of millions of women for Hitler’s project due to the practical social importance now accorded to the activities which they carried out anyways. To be a mother for the Fatherland, to save Germany, to put an end to want- the ideals interlocked and became synonymous with being a woman.”¹⁸ Nazi leaders were aware that the exclusive function of childbearing demeaned women; thus, the glorification of motherhood became one of three tactics for the Nazi Party to achieve this goal. This ideology is exemplified in Hitler’s 1935 Party Day speech when he proclaimed:

When our opponents say: You degrade women by assigning them no other task than that of childbearing, then I answer that it is not degrading to a woman to be a

¹³ Leila J. Rupp, “Mother of the ‘Volk’ The Image of Women in Nazi Germany,” *Signs* 3, no. 2 (1977): 370. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173289?searchText=&searchUri=&ab_segments=&searchKey=&refreqid=fas-tly-default%3Ae67604144e2a878878f9e2fd26d15e32

¹⁴ Leila J. Rupp, “Mother of the Volk,” 370.

¹⁵ Henry P. David, “Abortion and Eugenics in Nazi Germany,” 88.

¹⁶ Charu Gupta, “Politics of Gender,” 40.

¹⁷ Leila J. Rupp, “Mother of the Volk,” 364.

¹⁸ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, The Family, and Nazi Politics*. California: St. Martins Press, 1987. 87.

mother. On the contrary, it is her greatest honour. There is nothing nobler for a woman than to be the mother of the sons and daughters of the people.¹⁹

Through this paradigm, women could erect their own realm, “sufficiently free and autonomous for its explicit subordination to the male sphere no longer weighed so heavily.”²⁰ As a result, enthusiasm for a “specific women’s” sphere grew, for motherhood was a feminine contribution to the nation. Men served their nation through politics and war because women had more important things to do: they fed the “holy flame of motherhood.”²¹

In addition to Nazi Party members vocalizing their ‘respect’ for motherhood, various medals, tax concessions, and ‘privileges’ were conferred upon mothers by the Nazis. However, the Nazis learned from the mistakes of Weimar, so in 1933, they introduced a special loan program.²² First conceived as an economic measure to entice women out of the labour market and into domesticity, it quickly became a eugenic instrument to test the couple’s “genetic fitness for marriage; a certificate was required from a doctor proving genetic suitability and ‘Aryan’ descent.”²³ It promised interest-free loans to “racially fit couples” with the stipulation that the woman would not work until the loan was repaid; additionally, one-quarter of the initial loan was cancelled on the birth of each of the first four children.²⁴ ²⁵ The Nazis applied similar criteria to applicants of the Lebensborn scheme, which provided welfare to mostly unmarried ‘Aryan’ mothers, encouraged anonymous births at private maternity homes away from judgemental family or acquaintances, and mediated adoptions of ‘racially pure’ children to “fit” German parents in an attempt to discourage abortion among pregnant single women.²⁶ Additionally, the Nazis secured “living wages for men,” thus women who wished to stay home could do so and not be “forced into menial employment.”²⁷ Further, “a large number of books and pamphlets glorified with excessive sentimentality to the German mother, the mother of the *Volk*,” were distributed to encourage

¹⁹ Leila J. Rupp, “Mother of the Volk,” 364.

²⁰ Charu Gupta, “Politics of Gender,” 45.

²¹ Charu Gupta, “Politics of Gender,” 44.

²² Leila J. Rupp, “Mother of the Volk,” 371.

²³ Cornelia Usborne, “Social Body, Racial Body, Woman’s Body. Discourses, Policies, Practices from Wilhelmine to Nazi Germany, 1912-1945,” *Historical Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 36, no. 2 (2011): 152. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41151278>

²⁴ Charu Gupta, “Politics of Gender,” 42.

²⁵ Henry P. David, “Abortion and Eugenics in Nazi Germany,” 91.

²⁶ Cornelia Usborne, “Social Body, Racial Body, Woman’s Body,” 152.

²⁷ Leila J. Rupp, “Mother of the Volk,” 373.

motherhood without making large economic commitments.²⁸ These measures effectively addressed prospective parents' economic concerns and incentivized women to retreat from the so-called 'male sphere' to restore society's 'natural order.' Their new role as 'mother to the race' had increased "women's subordination to men."²⁹

Nazi "pronatalism for desirable births and its antinatalism for undesirable ones" were heavily intertwined.³⁰ The regime tried every possible means to "stamp out the practice of abortion and sterilization as a method of birth control for the racially valuable."³¹ The Berlin Council of Physicians declared that the "practice of abortion shall be exterminated with a strong hand" and "proceedings would be taken against every evil-doer who dares injure our sacred healthy race."³² Those who performed illegal abortions were deemed "professional abortionists," of the 91 professionals prosecuted between 1933 and 1939, 90 percent of them were women, most of whom were midwives previously disbarred for abortion-related activities.³³ Further, in 1933, the Nazis destroyed Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexology in Berlin, "closed all sex and marriage counselling centres," and destroyed related "research papers, books, and educational materials."³⁴ In that same year, newspapers were banned from printing advertisements for abortion services and contraceptives, prescribing a prison sentence of up to one year and a fine for anyone "publicly displaying, recommending, or providing information about methods or objects for preventing venereal diseases."³⁵ These policies were merely the beginning of the Nazi's assault on women's autonomy; the consequences of abortion escalated to the death penalty in the Second World War.³⁶

On May 26, 1933, two penal laws were introduced that prohibited the availability of abortion facilities and services; additionally, the stricter enforcement of the previous antiabortion law resulted in a 65 percent increase in yearly convictions between 1932 and 1938.³⁷ Harrowingly, from 1935 on, doctors and midwives were required to notify the regional state Health Office of

²⁸ Leila J. Rupp, "Mother of the Volk," 370-371.

²⁹ Cornelie Osborne, "Social Body, Racial Body, Woman's Body," 156.

³⁰ Giselle Bock, "Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany," 407.

³¹ Cornelie Osborne, "Social Body, Racial Body, Woman's Body," 152.

³² Henry P. David, "Abortion and Eugenics in Nazi Germany," 90.

³³ Henry P. David, "Abortion and Eugenics in Nazi Germany," 94.

³⁴ Henry P. David, "Abortion and Eugenics in Nazi Germany," 89.

³⁵ Henry P. David, "Abortion and Eugenics in Nazi Germany," 90.

³⁶ Cornelie Osborne, "Social Body, Racial Body, Woman's Body," 152.

³⁷ Giselle Bock, "Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany," 407.

every miscarriage; women's names and addresses were then handed over to the police to be investigated for possible abortions.³⁸ Following this law in 1936, the Reich's Central Agency for the Struggle against Homosexuality and Abortion was established, resulting in increased surveillance of "clandestine abortions" by imposing mandatory reporting of not only miscarriages but premature births and stillbirths before 32 weeks of pregnancy.^{39 40} This meant that women who had sought illegal abortions, feeling secure that a physician could attend to complications without being reported to the authorities, might now be deterred for fear of persecution.⁴¹ This policy likely increased the "morbidity of illegal abortions" by reducing the number of women "willing to face legal persecution" as a result of seeking medical treatment for postabortion complications.⁴² Thus, the patient-doctor relationship was replaced by the holy obligation to the state.

Women who were denied abortions or did not want to risk persecution, and women who did not want children or were endangered by childbirth, had to accept motherhood as forced labour: "the labour of childbirth in its modern misogynistic form and the labour of additional unpaid housework" in subservience to the Reich.⁴³

The Nazis were determined to subject "valuable" German women to motherhood, but they were just as determined to exclude as many "unvaluable" women from having children and men from begetting them, "with sterilization as their principal deterrent."⁴⁴ The Law for the Prevention of Offspring With Hereditary Diseases (German: *Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses*), sought to prevent the transmission of 'hereditary diseases' through forced sterilization, was passed on July 14, 1933. It was one of the most effective steps taken by the Third Reich to fulfill its objective of 'racial hygiene.'⁴⁵ Relevant details of the law found in the translation for the Nuremberg Trials state:

Par. 1: (1) Anyone who is suffering from a hereditary disease can be sterilized by a surgical operation if, according to the experiences of medical science, it is to be

³⁸ Giselle Bock, "Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany," 408.

³⁹ Henry P. David, "Abortion and Eugenics in Nazi Germany," 93.

⁴⁰ Giselle Bock, "Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany," 408.

⁴¹ Henry P. David, "Abortion and Eugenics in Nazi Germany," 93.

⁴² Henry P. David, "Abortion and Eugenics in Nazi Germany," 93.

⁴³ Giselle Bock, "Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany," 412.

⁴⁴ Giselle Bock, "Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany," 403.

⁴⁵ *German History in Documents and Images*, s.v "Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases (July 14, 1933)," March 19, 2024. https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1521

expected with great probability that his offspring will suffer from serious hereditary physical or mental defects. (2) Those who suffer from any of the following diseases are considered to be suffering from a hereditary disease within the, meaning of this law: 1. Mental deficiency from birth 2. Schizophrenia 3. Circular (manic-depressive) lunacy 4. Hereditary epilepsy 5. Hereditary St. Vitus' Dance (Huntington's Chorea) 6. Hereditary blindness 7. Hereditary deafness 8. Serious hereditary physical malformation. (3) Furthermore, persons suffering badly from alcoholism can be sterilized.

Par. 12: (1) Once the Court has finally decided on sterilization it must be carried out even against the will of the person to be sterilized. The civil service doctor has to request the necessary measures from the police authorities. Where other measures are insufficient, direct force may be used.⁴⁶

Although the law outlines specific criteria, sterilization was recommended as a solution to “urgent” social problems: “shiftlessness, ignorance, and laziness in the workforce; deviant sexual behaviour involving prostitution and illegitimate births; the increasing number of ill and insane; poverty; and the rising costs of social services.”⁴⁷ In 1935, “eugenic termination” was incorporated into this law to enable sterilization and abortion operations to be combined whenever possible.⁴⁸ Doctors were assured of “impunity” and encouraged to perform these procedures until all “hereditarily diseased persons were sterilized;” women’s ‘consent’ was rarely sought, and there was no time limit for the abortion to be performed.⁴⁹ The intention of eugenic sterilization and abortion was to both control procreation and impose a specific acceptable character on women and men. For men, this ideal represented “the hardworking male breadwinner, his hardworking but unpaid housewife, and children who were a financial burden to no one but their parents.”⁵⁰ For women, this was “represented by the worker who performed ungrudging housework and efficient labour in outside employment; her antithesis was the slut, the prostitute.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ Office of The United States, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Volume V*. (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1946) https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/llmlp/2011525363_NT_Nazi_Vol-V/2011525363_NT_Nazi_Vol-V.pdf 880-883.

⁴⁷ Giselle Bock, “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany,” 404.

⁴⁸ Cornelie Usborne, “Social Body, Racial Body, Woman’s Body,” 153.

⁴⁹ Cornelie Usborne, “Social Body, Racial Body, Woman’s Body,” 153.

⁵⁰ Giselle Bock, “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany,” 405.

⁵¹ Giselle Bock, “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany,” 414.

The Nazis built their files on who to target for sterilization by observing, judging, and evaluating the many marriage, sex, and eugenics counselling centres previously established by the Weimar Republic.⁵² By 1934, approximately 205 eugenics courts consisting of lawyers and doctors loyal to the regime had been established to decide who was worthy of procreation. During the first year of operation, approximately 100,000 applications for sterilization were submitted by social workers, 56,000 of which were carried out with equal amounts of women and men victimized.⁵³ Official German statistics report that more than 500,000 people were sterilized between 1933 and 1939, of which 30,000 resulted in death; there were also 5,000 eugenic abortions within this timeframe.⁵⁴

Although the approximate number of sterilizations implicate women and men equally, “women’s bodies, as the carriers of the future generation, came to represent the ills of the social body.”⁵⁵ In 1929, “a widely known book, *Sterilization on Social and Race Hygienic Grounds*, suggested that “the number of degenerate individuals born depends mainly on the number of degenerate women capable of procreation. Thus, the sterilization of degenerate women is for reasons of racial hygiene, more important than the sterilization of men.”⁵⁶ Consequently, women became the primary targets of these policies. Additionally, victims typically came from the lower class, with three categories of women overrepresented: “house servants, unskilled factory or farm workers, jobless housewives, and unmarried mothers.”⁵⁷ Further, sterilization proved much more traumatic for women since it was a risky operation and indeed, more women died as a result.⁵⁸ The rise of this policy, “sexist in its demand for state control of procreation, and racist in its differential treatment of *superior* and *inferior* procreation,” can be seen as a dual attack against the “birth-strike” of the desirable elements in the population and against “social maladjustment of those who had not enjoyed the modern training in orderliness and the work ethic, the *natural* task of *valuable* mothers.”⁵⁹

⁵² John Hunt, “Perfecting Humankind.” 34.

⁵³ John Hunt, “Perfecting Humankind.” 34.

⁵⁴ Charu Gupta, “Politics of Gender,” 2.

⁵⁵ Cornelie Usborne, “Social Body, Racial Body, Woman’s Body,” 155.

⁵⁶ Giselle Bock, “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany,” 406-407.

⁵⁷ Giselle Bock, “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany,” 414.

⁵⁸ Cornelie Usborne, “Social Body, Racial Body, Woman’s Body,” 153.

⁵⁹ Giselle Bock, “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany,” 406.

The tactics used to glorify motherhood were an effective smokescreen to detract from the absence of choice; women were either subjected to motherhood or prohibited from engaging in it. Prolific German mothers were awarded the Honour Cross and saluted by Hitler Youth, and those who were “less than” in the Nazi worldview were branded “race traitors” and subjected to horrific acts of eugenics.⁶⁰ This newly gained national importance of women’s reproductive work “provided society with a new rationale and tool for the disempowering of women rather than endowing them with new power.”⁶¹ The result was that all women, regardless of their status in the Third Reich, were oppressed through two sides of the same coin; thus, to control the reproduction of women is to control women.

The experience of pregnancy, abortion, and birth are ones which have no male analogy, and women’s decisions to continue a pregnancy or have an abortion are of invaluable significance to their lives.⁶² Yet, in the present day, doctors, lawyers, politicians, and Churches still impose their “norms of the meaning of conception, pregnancy, and miscarriage to devise rules for reproductive behaviour” to uphold the institutions of women’s oppression.⁶³ Hitler’s Third Reich barred women from self-determination by controlling their reproduction, and the West has heavily condemned these actions as the epitome of human rights abuses. Yet, they call themselves a democracy while simultaneously denying women the autonomy that forms the very foundation of the democratic system. Thus, the continued political regulation of abortion practiced by these supposed ‘democracies’ brings into question the legitimacy of democratic practice.⁶⁴ The regression of abortion rights in the United States makes them only one of four countries to do so; this assault on women’s rights forced a 10-year-old girl to travel from Ohio to Indiana to receive an abortion after being impregnated by her rapist.⁶⁵ This assault caused Amanda Zurawski a near-death experience after being denied abortion care due to loss of pregnancy at 18 weeks because doctors could still detect a fetal heartbeat; she spent six days fighting for her life in the ICU before being afforded

⁶⁰ Leila J. Rupp, “Mother of the Volk,” 371.

⁶¹ Cornelie Usborne, “Social Body, Racial Body, Woman’s Body,” 156.

⁶² Donna Greschner, “Abortion and Democracy for Women: A Critique of Tremblay v. Daigle,” *McGill Law Journal* 35, no. 3 (1990): 640. <https://lawjournal.mcgill.ca/article/abortion-and-democracy-for-women-a-critique-of-tremblay-v-daigle/>

⁶³ Cornelie Usborne, “Social Body, Racial Body, Woman’s Body,” 158.

⁶⁴ Donna Greschner, “Abortion and Democracy for Women,” 640.

⁶⁵ *Centre for Reproductive Rights*, s.v. “The World’s Abortion Laws,” April 1, 2024, <https://reproductiverights.org/maps/worlds-abortion-laws/>

the ‘privilege’ of life-saving abortion care.⁶⁶ In overturning *Roe v. Wade*, ‘the greatest country in the world’ sent a message that only men enjoy the fundamental rights to life, liberty, and self-determination, and that women shall exercise these *freedoms* only with the permission of men. The subordination of women under Hitler’s Third Reich was a manifestation of the misogynistic ideal of ‘Father Knows Best,’ an attitude and position that continues to be forced upon women even through the institutions of democracy.⁶⁷ This forces us to question the extent to which women are genuinely liberated from fascist oppression when men in democratic societies persist in the very behaviours they vehemently denounce. In a time when the leading cause of death among pregnant women in the ‘greatest country in the world’ is homicide at the hands of their male partner, women do not need Hitler’s Third Reich to experience the horrors of tyranny. ⁶⁸ ⁶⁹

⁶⁶ *Centre for Reproductive Rights*, s.v “The Plaintiffs and Their Stories: Zurawski v. State of Texas,” April 2, 2024, <https://reproductiverights.org/zurawski-v-texas-plaintiffs-stories-remarks/>

⁶⁷ Donna Greschner, “Abortion and Democracy for Women,” 641.

⁶⁸ John Hunt, “Perfecting Humankind: A Comparison of Progressive and Nazi Views on Eugenics, Sterilization and Abortion,” *The Linacre Quarterly* 66, no.1 (1999): 37. 10.1080/20508549.1999.11877527

⁶⁹ J. Campbell, S. Matoff-Stepp, M.L. Velez, H.H. Cox, K. Laughon “Pregnancy-Associated Deaths from Homicide, Suicide, and Drug Overdose: Review of Research and the Intersection with Intimate Partner Violence,” *J Womens Health* 30, no. 2 (2021): 236-244.
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