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Rosemarie Killius. *Frauen für die Front: Gespräche mit Wehrmachtshelferinnen.* Leipzig: Militzke Verlag, 2003. 192 S. EUR 19.90 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-86189-296-0.

Reviewed by Matthew Stibbe (Department of History, Sheffield Hallam University)

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The last decade or so has seen a significant transformation in the nature and scope of military history. Gone are the days when it was simply about generals and admirals, battle tactics and grand strategy, and advances in technology and weaponry. Today we have a military history informed by "history from below" and by new methodologies associated with the "cultural turn," memory, gender, post-colonialism, and anthropology. In the process we have also gathered fresh insights into the brutalizing impact of war on societies and communities, and on the minds of young people in particular.[1]

Disappointingly, Rosemarie Killius's new volume, *Frauen fÃÂ¼r die Front. GesprÃÂ¤che mit Wehrmachtshelferinnen*, makes little reference to these trends. Rather, it offers an oral history devoid of theoretical underpinnings and lacking in broader historical context, even if the personal stories are of undoubted interest in their own right.

The main part of the book consists of fourteen interviews conducted by Killius with former women auxiliaries of the German Wehrmacht, all now in their eighties. If Killius is to be believed, they are representative of the half a million or so young, single, and mainly middle-class women who were recruited for non-combatant military service during World War II. After brief periods of training they served in all parts of occupied Europe, including Norway, France, Italy, Yugoslavia, and of course the East. At first most of the women were volunteers, although towards the end of the war some were conscripted against their will. The motives for volunteering were varied, but included the ambition to travel abroad and see different places, or experience the "comradely" atmosphere unstintingly promoted through wartime posters and propaganda. Fanatical Nazis were few on the ground–or at least they are not represented here. One or two of the women, however, mention having been in the BDM, the girls' wing of the Hitler Youth, before 1939.

The interviews themselves provide some fascinating insights into life as a (female) member of an occupying army. France and Norway are described in nostalgic terms, with wonderful hosts and frequent excursions into the countryside, whereas the East is portrayed as very dangerous territory in which partisans were around every corner. Italy likewise appears as chaotic and menacing in the final months of the occupation, with anti-German sentiment reaching new heights among the local population. In general, though, the kind of duties performed by *Wehrmachtshelferinnen* were boring and routine, in keeping with gendered stereotypes about what was and what was not "suitable" work for women. The *Nachrichtenhelferinnen* mostly worked in shifts as wireless operators and telephone operators, while the *Stabshelferinnen* performed various clerical and admin-

istrative tasks or acted as official interpreters, and the *Luftschutzhelferinnen* were drafted in to assist air-raid warning teams. Their accounts are full of details about what they did on their days off, the people they met, the clothes they wore, the films they took in (even in the last days of the war), and the places they visited. Pride in the achievements of the Wehrmacht was often mixed in with homesickness, especially around Christmas time, and a certain irritation at being posted from one location to the next on very short notice. Secrecy was paramount, giving the women an added sense of responsibility, although they were seldom provided with information on the actual course or effectiveness of particular operations.

Death and destruction were not something witnessed on a regular basis until the final months of the fighting. Nonetheless, many of the girls did worry about the safety of friends and family back home, or of boyfriends serving on the eastern front. One interviewee who had risen to the rank of *FÃÂ¼hrerin* in command of a unit of thirty-five women in occupied Norway relates how the usually peaceful atmosphere could be interrupted by bad news from home. At one point she had to tell a member of her unit that her brother had been killed in action in Russia: "Ich ging mit ihr ans Meer und sagte zu ihr, schrei dich aus, bis du nicht mehr kannst. Und das tat sie und dann ging es ihr besser. Das war fÃÂ¼r mich ein furchtbares Erlebnis." Shortly afterwards her own fiancÃÂ© was killed: "Mir ging es dann ÃÂ¤hnlich, ich hab zwar nicht geschrieen, aber ich konnte kein Wort mehr sagen" (p. 29).

At home the *Wehrmachtshelferinnen* were often resented as privileged middle-class girls who knew little about the "real" hardships of war as experienced by bombed-out families, impoverished refugees, and shift workers in factories. Sometimes they were even insulted and referred to as officers' whores (*Offiziersmatratzen*). Most interviewees nonetheless insist on their sexual innocence and chasteness. There were often meetings with soldiers and officers, but all contained within a strict moral code of conduct which prevented physical intimacy. Foreign men were strictly off limits, and any indiscretions could have serious consequences. One woman who worked as an interpreter with a Cossack (White Russian) unit in occupied France, recalled: "Wenn ich mit den fremden Herren ausging, verfolgten mich meine deutschen Kollegen von den Schreibstuben ÃÂ¼berallhin, denn sie schienen Angst um meine Tugend zu haben" (p. 63). Reputation was everything, and those women promoted to positions of leadership were expected to set a good example in terms of dress and deportment.

One of the most interesting accounts is provided by Marie-Helene S. from GieÃ?en, who seems to have been more politically aware than most and spent two and a half years on air raid signals duties in occupied Belgium, where she struck up a forbidden friendship with a Belgian woman painter in Brussels. Admittedly their conversations usually revolved around art rather than politics, but the friendship in itself, although undiscovered, carried severe risks for both women. Brussels at this time (1942/3) was a great place to be for a young, independent German woman. The black market was booming and one could buy any luxury imaginable if one had the money. Again Germans and Belgians often came together to engage in illegal black market trade. After the Normandy landings, though, Frau S. was evacuated several times and witnessed the full horror of war at close quarters: "Wir bekamen Dinge mit, von denen die BevÃÂ¶lkerung in Deutschland keine Ahnung hatte. Mich bedrÃÂ¼ckte das alles sehr" (p. 104).

In chapter 15, Killius also tells the moving story of Liselotte F., a Wehrmacht auxiliary from Nuremberg who was posted to occupied Riga in 1942 and came into contact with Bertha E., a German Jew deported with her husband to Riga in the previous year. The two women had in common that they both came from Nuremberg and spoke the local dialect. Secretly Liselotte began to give food to Bertha to feed herself and other Jewish deportees in the nearby ghetto. This continued until her arrest at the end of 1942 or the beginning of 1943. Fortunately she survived (it is not clear how), as did Bertha E., who later ensured that the story reached the Holocaust memorial center at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Clearly in some limited circumstances individuals could rise above the general atmosphere of fear and racial hatred, and Killius reminds us of the powerful words of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu: "Es ist zum Beispiel bekannt, dass in den Grenzsituationen gewisser Krisenzeiten manche Menschen sich und anderen bisher unbekannte FÃÂ¤higkeiten offenbaren" (p. 186).

The other side of the equation, though, is that the vast majority of *Wehrmachtshelferinnen* did hear and see things during their time on active service, but did nothing. Some plead ignorance–they knew about concentration camps but not about Auschwitz or its gas chambers. The deported Jews, they believed, were destined for forced labor, not death. Others admit in retrospect that they could–or should–have done more to help fellow human beings in distress, but that they had been

conditioned to follow orders and not question authority. One interviewee clearly felt it necessary to explain her actions to the younger generation: "Im Nachhinein fragt man sich, ob das alles so richtig war. Wir waren so erzogen, dass wir das, was wir machen sollten, eben gemacht haben. Die heutige Jugend, die denkt da ganz anders. Aber wir waren gewohnt, zu tun, was wir gesagt bekamen. Da hÃÂ¤tte sich keine getraut nein zu sagen" (p. 85). Another interviewee was more blunt, however: "Auf die Anklagen der jungen Generation kann ich nur antworten: Was wisst ihr jetzt und was tut ihr heute gegen MissstÃÂ¤nde? Sie kÃÂ¶nnen heute alles machen, alles sagen und man kommt nicht von der Familie weg in ein Lager. Das kann man sich nicht vorstellen ... Sie sind nicht in Gefahr. Wir waren es" (p. 38).

While the Holocaust and other wartime atrocities are at least acknowledged in many of these accounts, a more depressing theme is the failure to come to terms with Germany's responsibility for the war itself and the mass destruction it brought in its wake. "Ordinary" people, we are told, lived through this period, experiencing the usual ups and downs of life against a constantly changing background of violence and death on the one hand, and relative normality on the other. Above all the *Wehrmachtshelferinnen* were interested in having fun and enjoying new adventures while doing their duty to the fatherland. Most were willfully ignorant of politics, but nonetheless felt a certain pride in the fact that they were freeing up soldiers to fight at the front. As one of the interviewees puts it: "Wir waren Deutsche, keine Nazis, so wie die Offiziere auch nicht unbedingt alle Nazis waren. Aber man hat das fÃÂ¼r Deutschland getan ... [und] hat sich auch gefreut, wenn zuerst Erfolge waren, bis man merkte, es ist furchtbar, es ist sinnlos, was wir machen" (p. 32). In fact, even after 1944 there was no real resistance among the *Wehrmachtshelferinnen*, and dissent was mostly restricted to a vague feeling of sympathy with the leaders of the July plot, combined with the notion that it was impossible–and even unthinkable–to disobey orders, especially in time of war.

In general, then, the individual stories retold in this volume provide a new dimension to our understanding of the diversity of German women's experiences of the Second World War. Not all women were confined to the home front, and single women in particular were given opportunities for travel and adventure which many now look back on with an ambivalent mixture of nostalgia and regret.[2] Whether today's generation can or should positively identify with the exploits of the *Wehrmachtshelferinnen*, as Killius's introduction seems to imply, is a different matter, however. The crimes committed by the Wehrmacht in occupied territory, particularly in the East, would suggest otherwise.[3] Readers will also take note of the strong middle-class bias of most of the respondents and their obsession with uniforms and ideas of order, discipline, and hierarchy. In spite of their claims to be "nonpolitical" the majority seem to have come from conservative family backgrounds in which support for the German state and for Hitler was taken for granted and distrust of Jews and other "outsiders" was commonplace. Coming to terms with this particular aspect of their personal histories still confounds them even sixty years after the end of the war.

Notes

[1]. For some excellent examples of these new approaches, see the many contributions in Karen Hagemann and Stefanie SchÃÂ¼ler-Springorum, eds., *Home/Front. The Military, War and Gender in Twentieth Century Germany* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002); see H-German review at `http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=229111085713745`. An earlier classic is George L. Mosse's *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[2]. This is also evident in some of the interviews recently conducted by Elizabeth Harvey with German women who were recruited to work as civilian welfare and educational workers in occupied Poland and further East. See Harvey, " 'We Forgot All Jews and Poles.' German Women and the 'Ethnic Struggle' in Nazi-occupied Poland," *Contemporary European History* 10 (2001): pp. 447-461; and idem., *Women and the Nazi East. Agents and Witnesses of Germanization* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003); see H-German review at `http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=305031094368641`.

[3]. Relevant scholarly publications in this field include Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann, eds., *War of Extermination. The German Military in World War II, 1941-1944* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000); Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-45. German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Wolf Kaiser, ed., *TÃÂ¤ter im Vernichtungskrieg. Der Ã?berfall auf die Sowjetunion und der VÃÂ¶lkermord an den Juden* (Berlin: PropylÃÂ¤en, 2002).

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