

Christina Herkommer. *Frauen im Nationalsozialismus - Opfer oder Täterinnen?: Eine Kontroverse der Frauenforschung im Spiegel feministischer Theoriebildung und der allgemeinen historischen Aufarbeitung der NS-Vergangenheit.* München: Martin Meidenbauer Verlag, 2005. 89 S. EUR 14.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-89975-521-3.



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Even more than that of most periods, the history of National Socialist Germany is usually a very masculine narrative. Not only did the Nazi regime trumpet the glory of masculine virtues such as courage, toughness, and aggression, it also excluded women from policymaking even more decisively than other contemporary western governments, most of which featured a few token women in important (or at least visible) positions. Hitler declared in 1934 that the public world of politics and the state was for men only, and that women must limit themselves to their husbands, families, and homes. Nonetheless, women played an important role in the formation and development of the Nazi state. After all, they made up more than half of the population, and despite Hitler's dictum, were very much involved in the public world—as workers, as shapers of public opinion, and as supporters and opponents of the Nazi party. In their roles as mothers, too, some women were assigned an important public role as producers of soldiers and citizens. Women also figured conspicuously among the perpetrators of Nazi crimes and the victims of genocide. But histories of this era, most of which are written by, about, and for men, often consign this large, important group to invisibility. Starting in the 1970s, a new generation of feminist historians resolved to make women visible and to reconstruct their lives and activities in all historical periods. These scholars, who created women's history as an academic

discipline, did not aim merely to uncover new information, but also to integrate their findings into a theoretical analysis of the relationship of women to the male-dominated political systems under which they have always lived. In her short book on the research in this area, sociologist Christina Herkommer concisely analyzes the controversies that surrounded the first feminist histories of women in the Third Reich.

Herkommer begins with the pioneering feminist historians of the 1970s and 1980s, who set out in search of a “usable past” to motivate their sisters in the movement to resist male supremacy in all forms. An ideology that stressed male power and female oppression shaped these scholars' picture of Nazi Germany. As they saw it, the Nazi government was an instrument of male domination that reduced all women to powerlessness. Of course, they had ample evidence for this view—no women played any significant role in policymaking, and the system reinforced male supremacy in many forms. Nonetheless, Herkommer rightly criticizes these early feminists for contributing (albeit unintentionally) to the popular post-war picture of the German people as the innocent victims of an evil dictatorship—a view that denied the responsibility of “ordinary” German citizens (women as well as men) for the regime's actions.

Within a few years, this picture of women in the Third

Reich had changed along with the dominant feminist ideology. Early German feminist theory had assumed that women constituted a distinct group, separated from men both by its subordinate status and its biological and psychological makeup. By the late 1980s, many had come to reject this view and asserted that men and women were more alike than different, sharing common concerns and attitudes in the realm of politics as in other areas. The implication was that women were not innocent victims, but rather willing supporters of men and all their activities, including crimes and atrocities. Historians such as Claudia Koonz argued that German women, although excluded from leadership positions, bore considerable responsibility for their government's actions. As wives and mothers, women of the racially elite group provided essential support to male Nazi criminals by providing a tranquil domestic refuge from the horrors of war and genocide.

Because it seemed to inculcate the majority of German women simply based on marital status and occupation, many historians rejected Koonz's argument. German historian Gisela Bock claimed that most German wives and mothers had done nothing more nor less than similar women had done in many other times and places—they had cared for their homes, families, and children. Bock further argued that most of the women most seriously implicated in Nazi crimes were not married with children but rather professionals (such as physicians, nurses, and social workers) and concentration-camp guards, most of whom were unmarried and childless.

In a discussion that became so heated as to be called the "Historikerinnenstreit"—an allusion to the "Historikerstreit" of this same period—other feminists accused Bock (in my view, unfairly) of bias favoring mothers and against single career women. This debate derived a great deal of its passion from contemporary political concerns, particularly about governmental policies designed to encourage motherhood. Sociologist Christina Thürmer-Rohr denounced what she saw as a dangerous tendency to idealize motherhood by portraying the privileged mothers of the Nazi era as hypocrites who used sentimental rhetoric to mask their ruthless pursuit of racial supremacy and political power.

Herkommer's narrative concludes with the present, when feminist scholars no longer assign to women a common status, history, and outlook. Historians of women in the Third Reich now avoid overgeneralization about women as a group, and instead look at women as

unique individuals. Herkommer asks whether it is still possible to write a history of women in this or any other period, or if gender has lost its validity as a category of analysis.

Though it offers little to specialists in the history of the Third Reich, this book will be useful to non-specialists, for whom it provides an accessible summary of a complex historical debate. But its value is limited by its narrow coverage. Herkommer focuses only on German (before 1990, West German) scholarship, including historians of other countries only when they directly influenced Germans. By omitting non-German scholars, Herkommer also excludes many theoretical perspectives that would have greatly enriched her understanding of the issues.

Moreover, the segment of women that this book covers is not only narrow, but never properly delineated. Herkommer asks in her title whether women were victims or perpetrators. But what women is she referring to? In her introduction, the author limits her scope to "women who were not persecuted" (*unverfolgten Frauen*) (p. 10). In another context, she defines this group as women who were not victimized "on racist, political, religious, or other grounds" (p. 9). But even women who were exempt from this persecution might still have been subject to compulsory sterilization or imprisonment for "asocial" behavior, deprived of educational or job opportunities, or denied the means to control their fertility. Can these injustices be entirely separated from other forms of persecution? If she had considered a more diverse group of women, ranging from the relatively privileged to the wholly outcast, Herkommer might have addressed this important question.

Herkommer rightly notes that it is impossible to generalize about the behavior of such a diverse group as "women." But the problem lies even deeper. In fact (as Gisela Bock and other historians have pointed out), in this, as in many other cases, it is impossible to speak of "women" as a group. Under the Nazi system, race always took priority over gender, and the status of both women and men depended to a large degree on their assigned racial classifications. For example: while racially elite women were encouraged or forced to become mothers, women of non-elite groups suffered sterilization or forced abortions; while racially elite women were stereotyped as housewives, women of other groups were removed from their homes and made to do forced labor, and so on. Women of the racial elite shared some privileges, and those of persecuted groups many disadvan-

tages, with similarly situated men. Gender is an effective category of analysis only as it intersects with other aspects of identity, such as race, class, religion, nationality, and many others.

This summary of a bygone historical controversy reminds us both of the strengths and the weaknesses of feminist historiography. The historians discussed here (along with their colleagues in other countries) deserve enormous credit for reconstructing this previously hidden history and for dealing with the uncomfortable questions raised by their findings. These findings, though

still often overlooked by mainstream history, have contributed a great deal to our understanding not only of the history of women, but of the Nazi era as a whole. However, it is also painfully obvious that scholarship, in the history of women and gender as in other fields, has too often been placed in the service of ideological commitments or political partisanship. Recent works on women, gender relations, and sexualities in the Third Reich—those of Michelle Mouton, Elizabeth Harvey, Dagmar Reese, Gudrun Schwarz, Dagmar Herzog, and Lisa Pine among others—show the openness to ambiguity and complexity that marks a mature academic discipline.

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