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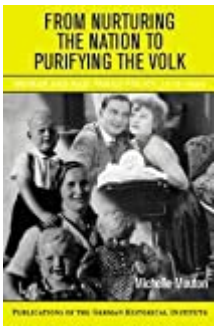

Michelle Mouton. *From Nurturing the Nation to Purifying the Volk: Weimar and Nazi Family Policy, 1918-1945.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xvi + 309 pp. $78.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-86184-7.

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Innovative Approaches to Historical Change and Agency

Michelle Mouton adopts a highly innovative, impressive approach to the history of Weimar and Nazi Germany, topics of long interest to German historians–in their own right and as intricately and tragically connected entities. Her focus falls on family policy in the decades of the l920s and l930s and into the Second World War, confirming the fundamental insight of Robert Moeller about the centrality of the family for many major themes in the twentieth century.[1] The study, therefore, unfolds against the backdrop of the wider geopolitical context of war and defeat, democratic experiments and fascist takeover, as well as specific changes in state welfare policies, contested gender notions, and secular demographic changes. Illuminated by rich archival evidence and carefully interwoven oral histories, family policy becomes a lens to uncover the everyday life of many Germans during these critical years in the first half of the twentieth century. The book speaks to important debates in German history and at the same time will find wider audiences interested in a "new" social and gender history.

The innovation lies in good measure in the book's organization and methodology, buttressed by the clarity of its arguments. Drawing two distinct regimes together, Mouton takes a clear position on the thorny issue of change and continuity in this charged era. Despite the continuous patterns of government interaction to shape private family matters through interventionist public policies, Mouton stresses "profound differences in the reception and impact of Weimar and Nazi policy design" (p. 15). Family policy issues were highly contested matters in the Weimar Republic. As she notes, "[a]t no time did Weimar policymakers claim the right to dictate what the family did: women were encouraged to mother, but they were also granted the right to pursue university studies or employment outside the home" (p. 15). Nazi policy, therefore, "did not develop continuously or smoothly from that of its Weimar predecessors" (p. 15).

This foundational argument is carefully anchored in the thematic organization of the book. With meticulous attention to evidence, Mouton dissects six central arenas of family policy, following their fortunes in time across the political divides. While she shows some areas of continuity, she stresses significant differences in the orientation of these policies. In turn, the organiza-

tion is supported by a persuasive causal model that interconnects decision-making from above (and Mouton offers many valuable details about changes in official state welfare policies) with implementation and daily life on the ground. As she puts it, to understand how "national policy affected individual lives requires a microhistorical approach only possible in a local study" (p. l9). Her choice for this task falls upon Westphalia, an area distinct from the Berlin orbit. If not a microcosm of wider German society, it is nonetheless a distinct region with its own archives and boundaries that facilitate statistical coherency, and the added advantage of offering a sample that includes both a mixed Catholic and Protestant population and a small number of Jews, as well as a mixed economy of heavy industry, agriculture, and civil service administration. Her focus on local implementation also allows new interpretations of the nature of rule and the divergence between state prescriptions and design on the one hand and actual implementation on the other as shown, for example, in her discussion of Nazi pro-and anti-natalist policies for racial goals. This model also allows Mouton to detail the emergence of a multitude of social agents central to policy formulation and implementation (decision-makers at all state levels and across the political spectrum in Weimar) and people who "collaborated with, rebelled against and maneuvered around the state's dictates regarding families" (p. 3). These include doctors, organized feminists, staff at lay clinics, judges, social workers, state-appointed guardians, and ordinary men and women at the epicenter of family policies confronting the regulations that impinged on their lives. The complex meanings of family policies were shaped in the nexus of social interactions among and between these diverse agents.

Specialists may find that the book opens somewhat conventionally by discussing many of the major characteristics of the Weimar and Nazi states. With her deliberate focus on the Weimar and National Socialist regimes, Mouton tends to underplay continuities between imperial German and World War I-era welfare and charitable policies, reinforced by social mobilization from below, and their impacts on the Weimar welfare state. In treating Weimar's politicians, she is inclined to stress the new. Each subsequent chapter takes up a major subject covered by official family policy. In six thoroughly researched and fascinating cases, Mouton examines marriage policy, the issue of divorce, the promotion of motherhood, policies designed to facilitate motherhood in the context of female labor and wartime burdens and, finally, foster care and adoption. By examining national policy as well as actual practice in Westphalia, she carefully makes the case for "radical departure" from Weimar to the Nazi state in peace and wartime (p. 282). She provides an impressive array of evidence for each theme, showing the divergence of views in Weimar and the clarity of purpose in the Nazi racial state, examining, however, the levels of Nazi designs–pronatal for the so-called Aryan ("worthy") couples; anti-natal for the so-called asocial ("unworthy"), who were often working-class couples; and, ultimately, exterminationist for Jews and other racially-targeted minorities. The major focus of this part of the study is on state and local officials' interactions with so-called worthy German couples. Mouton points out that their spheres of maneuverability and agency did not constitute (political) resistance but rather "selective compliance," a finding consistent with other research also written against the grain of the totalitarian model (p. 279). In her use of evidence, she is explicit about what she can and cannot say from the sources. Operating within the parameters of women's history, Mouton also provides gender analysis, breaking down, for example, the different reasons men and women gave for divorce or documenting persistent gender biases among judges making life-changing decisions about sterilization. Mouton does not shy away, either, from describing the precise contexts for emerging eugenics arguments in Weimar, noting, however, their centrality to Nazi policy and importantly, the different contexts in which local doctors, judges, or officials subverted doctrinal intent.

Mouton does not offer a balanced account of each regime. Ultimately, the Weimar Republic serves more as a backdrop to the Nazi era than as a separate topic. This imbalance is clearly seen in the forty-eight oral interviews she selects to exploit. Although a number of her subjects were born shortly after the turn of the century and thus reached maturity in the Weimar era, Mouton uses their recollections nearly exclusively to illustrate social conditions under the Nazi regime, without a parallel effort to provide first hand accounts of family life or of highly contentious public debates or issues for the Weimar Republic. In addition, given the formal model in the thematic unfolding of the arguments, some repetition occurs in the chapters. But these are minor quibbles. This extremely well-written, engaging, and fascinating study brings a critical eye for valuable details about family life in the everyday as it intersected with German state officials' long-standing interest in family affairs.

Note

[1]. Robert G. Moeller, "The Elephant in the Living

Room: Or Why the History of the Twentieth-Century Should be a Family Affair," in *Gendering Modern German History: Rewriting Historiography*, ed. Karen Hagemann and Jean H. Quataert (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 230.