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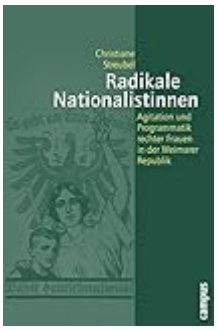


**Christiane Streubel.** *Radikale Nationalistinnen: Agitation und Programmatik rechter Frauen in der Weimarer Republik.* Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2006. 444 pp. EUR 45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-593-38210-4.

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**Published on** H-German (June, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

## A Woman's Place in the Radical Right: Gender and Nationalism in Weimar

Christiane Streubel confronts a series of fascinating and crucial questions in German gender and social history: Why did radical nationalism appeal to a substantial number of women after 1918? How did right-wing women define their ideology, gender roles, and political identities?[1] Streubel does a fine job focusing on a number of "forgotten voices" in Weimar politics, and one of the strengths of her work is that she avoids presenting right-wing women activists as aberrations or curiosities. Further, Streubel seeks to complicate what she sees as fixed categories of women that predominate in existing scholarship, suggesting that definitions of "Nazi female militants" and "right-wing feminists" need to be broken down and analyzed more carefully from the perspectives of women. By providing a rigorous analysis of case studies of nationalist women, Streubel is able to address the complexities of gender discourse, and in particular, the relationship between right-wing women and feminism. Interestingly, Streubel breaks down ideological polarities between the Right and the Left in order to analyze how these women defined themselves and their ideas, and she adds more to our knowledge of the diversity of radical nationalism and competing concepts of the "national community." She effectively avoids imposing false consciousness as she focuses on articles produced by women in the mass media to catch a glimpse into how ideas about feminism and nationalism were constructed in the minds of women on the right.

Streubel argues that radical nationalist women in the Weimar Republic defined a "new political language" that integrated elements of feminism and radical nationalism, which she characterizes as a variant of feminist ideology (p. 17). At the center of this study is the Ring Nationaler Frauen (RNF), which was founded to synthesize nationalist women's organizations that grew out of the First World War. Though relatively small with only twenty thousand members, and not a real threat to the Bund der deutsche Frauen (BDF) on the political left, Streubel argues that the RNF was significant in that it sharpened the voices of nationalist women and cemented their place in the ideological structure of the political right. Their goal was to incorporate their version of the *Volksgemein-*

*schaft* into the domestic sphere. Through their periodical *Die Deutsche Frau*, the RNF reached out to other nationalist groups to push for conservative revolution in reaction against the new democracy. These goals were clearly established, but the RNF's conceptions of national community, feminism, and nationalism were many-sided, and they were appropriated to promote new interests and hierarchies.

In her first section, Streubel explores the "speaking spaces" available to nationalist women. What chances did women have to express their voices in Weimar's radical right milieu? Streubel convincingly demonstrates that the proliferation of hypernationalist print media in the wake of 1918 gave voice and audience to women mobilized by the war. As journalism gradually admitted women to careers in its lower echelons, conservative women were able to gain a foothold. Streubel focuses on a number of case studies of women who negotiated complex identities as both critics and beneficiaries of the women's movement. KÃ¤the Schirmacher, for example, encouraged women to join one of many nationalist women's associations coordinated by the German National People's Party (DNVP), and she helped define the "new womanhood" that called for the "German woman" to tear down the Left's model for women's political rights. Oscillating even further to the right, Schirmacher called for the destruction of the republic and created the RNF to help "liberate" women from the "anti-Fatherland" women's movement. Though they rejected the Left's programs for women, leaders in the RNF still openly admired the liberal women's movement's energy and organization. Hoping to broaden their appeal, they mixed some socialist rhetoric with increasingly *vÃ¶lkisch* nationalism, and while many held to the DNVP's radical wing, a number of the RNF's leaders were drawn to National Socialist ideology.

In her third section, Streubel shifts from leadership and organization to the RNF's ideological program. She highlights a fascinating paradox: while these women journalists avoided discussions of gender politics, they carefully cultivated an image of the "German" woman as the emotional and spiritual center of the national community, and the basis for national regeneration. Streubel employs a fascinating close analysis of the rhetoric found in RNF literature, and she identifies key words and concepts that reveal the character and ideas of the radical Right. Femininity was conflated with nature, essence, and a quasi-mystical conception of motherhood that gave women power and significance. The "conscience of the German woman" was inextricably tied to defending the morality and survival of the *Volk* (pp. 270-271). The *Volk* was portrayed as a "blooming garden" nurtured by women who picked the weeds from the "pure" community. Streubel sees this emphasis on spiritually empowered women as the basis for the relative popularity of hypernationalism among women: it gave them a sense of belonging and strength as integral members of the nation. At the same time, this image of empowerment, albeit spiritual, created tensions between women and male leaders in the *vÃ¶lkisch* movement. Some women tried to translate their alleged spiritual power as caregivers into careers educating the national community in national values, but were limited as men refused to relinquish power to women beyond the realm of "Liebeswerk" and "domestic order," as expressed through participation in organizing women's associations. Streubel concludes that the far Right's image of empowered women mobilized behind *vÃ¶lkisch* nationalism was mostly an image, or at least confined to carefully controlled roles while men justified and protected their positions as "carriers of the state" (p. 355).

Streubel's book is an excellent resource for any scholar interested in German gender history. Her close analysis of these sources is persuasive and a fascinating model for interpreting the significance of language and gender. Even so, some questions remain that can be leveled at her study: for example, to what degree do the women's newspapers, used here almost exclusively, provide a substantial glimpse into right-wing women's conceptions of "femininity" and nationhood? To her credit, Streubel directly acknowledges this problem with an extensive discussion of her sources and the difficulty of obtaining many letters by women in leadership positions within the RNF. More importantly, Streubel defuses this potential problem by demonstrating in her nuanced and systematic analysis of articles produced by women journalists how rich the periodicals are as a resource. For anyone seeking to understand the continuity between the First World War and the Third Reich's conceptions of women and the national community, Streubel's work is essential.

Note

[1]. For an expert overview of the historiography on gender in German history, see Kathleen Canning, *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

**Citation:** Jason Crouthamel. Review of Streubel, Christiane, *Radikale Nationalistinnen: Agitation und Programmatik rechter Frauen in der Weimarer Republik.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2009.

**URL:** http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24164