

Kirsten Heinsohn. *Konservative Parteien in Deutschland 1912 bis 1933: Demokratisierung und Partizipation in geschlechterhistorischer Perspektive.* Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 2010. 302 S. ISBN 978-3-7700-5295-0.



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K. Heinsohn: *Konservative Parteien in Deutschland 1912 bis 1933*

Kirsten Heinsohn's new book analyzes German conservative parties from a gendered perspective in the context of the rise and fall of democratic republicanism. She investigates the political self-understanding of conservatives in response to war, defeat, democratization and parliamentary crisis and assesses the influence of gender relations on conservative beliefs and behavior. Methodologically, Heinsohn combines a political-historical focus on leaders and institutions (including parties, parliamentary delegations, women's committees, and women's organizations) with a cultural-linguistic analysis of the rhetoric employed by women journalists and politicians. After briefly surveying developments in the Conservative Party and the Fatherland Party, Heinsohn turns to the Weimar-era conservative parties: German National People's Party (DNVP), Christian-Social People's Service (CSVD), and the Conservative People's Party (KVP). The study is heavily weighted toward the DNVP, by far the most significant conservative-right party.

Heinsohn's research is drawn from many archival collections and personal papers. Most references to primary records are, however, to publications of the con-

servative parties, conservative or völkisch intellectuals, and conservative and Protestant women's organizations. Heinsohn relies heavily on print sources due to the paucity of Nachlässe and other types of documents left by women politicians and journalists. The limited variety of available primary materials helps explain Heinsohn's lopsided attention to national-level (and, to a much lesser extent, Prussian) political activities, on the one hand, and to leading DNVP women such as Margarethe Behm, Paula Mueller-Otfried, Käthe Schirmacher, Annagrete Lehmann, Magdalena von Tiling, and Elisabeth Spohr, on the other. In the early 2000s, Heinsohn produced pioneering articles on these and other conservative women. Kirsten Heinsohn, *Im Dienste der deutschen Volksgemeinschaft. Die "Frauenfrage" und konservative Parteien vor und nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, in: Ute Planert (Hrsg.), *Nation, Politik und Geschlecht. Frauenbewegung und Nationalismus in der Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main 2000; Kirsten Heinsohn, *Denkstil und kollektiver Selbstentwurf im konservativ-völkischen Frauenmilieu*, in: Rainer Hering / Rainer Nicolaysen (Hrsg.), *Lebendige Sozialgeschichte. Gedenkschrift für Peter Borowsky*, Wien 2003. Since then, this scholarly field has

become considerably better plowed. Andrea Schäppling-Häppling, Raffael Scheck, Christiane Streubel, and Julia Sneeringer have each published a book that addresses significant aspects of the ideology and activities of nationalist oriented women before 1933. Andrea Schäppling-Häppling, *Das "Gewissen der Nation". Nationales Engagement und politisches Handeln konservativer Frauenorganisationen 1900 bis 1937*, Düsseldorf 2002; Raffael Scheck, *Mothers of the Nation: Right-Wing Women in Weimar Germany*, Oxford 2004; Christiane Streubel, *Radikale Nationalistinnen. Agitation und Programmatik rechter Frauen in der Weimarer Republik*, Frankfurt am Main 2006; Julia Sneeringer, *Winning Women's Votes: Propaganda and Politics in Weimar Germany*, Chapel Hill, NC 2002.

Conservative women, Heinsohn shows, quickly adapted to the Republic's granting of female suffrage, even though most women conservatives had for decades opposed women's voting rights. When women voted disproportionately for conservatives (and the Catholic Center party) in the election to the National Assembly, male party leaders too came round on the issue of women's right to vote. Having jettisoned their deeply-held opposition to women's political citizenship, conservatives never looked back. They continued to cling, of course, to their deeply-held rejection of the democratic Republic that gave women political rights. We can criticize male conservative leaders as hypocritical on this (and other) issues. It is more difficult to make sense of the apparently inconsistent convictions of conservative women. Women owed what little influence they gained within the male-dominated structures of the DNVP and other conservative parties to a combination of women's suffrage, the voting inclinations of Weimar women, and the "Kuhhandel" of parliamentary politics. Yet, along with nationalist men, they abhorred the republic and, after 1928, pursued radical, anti-parliamentary goals.

Heinsohn's book goes far to explain this paradox. She does so, above all, through a careful analysis of the origins and evolution of the DNVP's National Women's Committee (Reichsfrauenausschuss or RFA). Heinsohn discusses the RFA's efforts to support women parliamentarians and to mobilize women voters, its leaders' relationships with other women's organizations and right-wing women journalists, and its relations with DNVP men, nominating committees, Reichstag delegation, and interest groups. The RFA constantly pressed leading men to place more women in electable positions on party election lists. Although Count Cuno von Westarp and others recognized that women delegates brought electoral ben-

efits, they did little to promote their candidacies. They viewed "women" as one interest group among many, such as landowners, industrialists, retailers, white-collar employees, and youth. Some national, and many state and local, leaders actively resisted placing women in electable spots on the lists. The Reichstag delegation was never more than 5 percent female, even though, by RFA calculations, 57 percent of DNVP voters in the May 1928 election were female.

Despite their small numbers, women parliamentarians played a major role in parliamentary debates and negotiations about issues close to the hearts of conservative women. They tenaciously fought for their positions on cultural issues such as marriage law or protection of confessionals schools. Cultural questions were the particular terrain of women such as Mueller-Otfried who entered politics from Protestant women's organizations. Christian Social unions formed a second important path into politics for conservative women. Behm, for example, was the long-time chairwoman of the *Gewerkverein der Heimarbeiterinnen*. She and others from the Christian workers' movement concerned themselves with employed women's issues such as protective labor measures and regulations concerning married female civil servants and teachers.

Heinsohn discusses conservative women's internal disputes about women's equality. Schirmacher and several other DNVP women were "überzeugte Vertreterinnen von Frauenrechten" (p. 88). "Völkisch" women commentators and Lutheran activists attacked Schirmacher, Behm and others for their alleged "Frauenrechtleri." "Völkisch" women not only rejected women's equality in and of itself, but also denounced it as a slippery slope toward feminist internationalism. Mueller-Otfried and Schirmacher vehemently denied that they harbored inclinations toward peace and understanding. Indeed, Schirmacher stood at the super-nationalist end of the DNVP political spectrum.

Conservative women's commitment to nationalist policies was, Heinsohn argues, one reason that RFA leaders enthusiastically supported Alfred Hugenberg's rise to power in the DNVP. They endorsed his insistence on uncompromising, anti-parliamentary politics in the wake of major DNVP electoral losses in May 1928. They supported his attack on the governmental wing around Westarp and his decision to join the National Opposition with the NSDAP. The turn toward Hugenberg, Heinsohn contends, also bespoke women leaders' frustration with the indifference and even hostility of the governmental wing

toward women's issues. Hugenberg, in contrast, courted women by blaming electoral losses on DNVP neglect of women's issues.

In addition to a political explanation of women's affinity for nationalist anti-parliamentarism, Heinsohn offers a cultural-linguistic interpretation. Using the concept of *gedachte Ordnungen*, she argues that conservative women's sense of *collective identity* was captured, above all, by the phrase *die deutsche Frau* (p. 109), while the term *Volksgemeinschaft* expressed their vision of a harmonious German social order in which women and men would enjoy equal worth, while devoting themselves to their different strengths. These *gedachte Ordnungen* not only inspired and motivated women activists but also structured their view of the real world and, thus, their interactions with political opponents on the Left and with men in their own party. The

powerful feelings that bound conservative women to an *imagined order* made them susceptible, Heinsohn suggests, to both the radicalized content and the highly emotional style of the National Opposition's politics.

Heinsohn's discussion of the RFA's waning parliamentary orientation and its turn to the far right is rich in detail and insights. Less illuminating are the book's rather sketchy comments on the declining influence of the Christian Social unions and Lutheran women's organizations in the DNVP and the connection between this decline and the reduction of women's influence in the party. Also useful would have been more attention to campaign propaganda and organizational efforts of elite women to recruit ordinary women to the DNVP. Finally, given the focus on prominent women conservatives, one would have appreciated more information about their social background and personal histories.

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