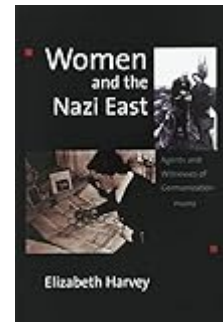


Elizabeth Harvey. *Women and the Nazi East: Agents and Witnesses of Germanization.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. xii + 384 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10040-2.



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In recent years, a growing amount of scholarship has been devoted to studies of German women and their experiences inside the Third Reich.[1] In her recent work, *Women and the Nazi East*, Elizabeth Harvey moves away from such a focus to examine the activities of female Germans outside the Fatherland, namely in occupied Poland. Her work draws effectively on striking primary sources to provide a work of interest not only to the historian or gender scholar, but to students of psychology and sociology as well.

Under the Nazi regime, women enjoyed little public voice. Instead, their roles were limited mostly to providing the *Fuehrer* with as many children as possible and raising them to become loyal mothers or soldiers. Such activities served Nazi government goals of populating the East with “racially-pure” individuals. But these regions were not barren wastelands. They were the homelands of many different races and ethnicities not about to abandon their homes voluntarily. Hitler believed they needed to be swept away by the hand of National Socialism to make way for “pure-blooded” peoples. SS men (and some women attached to the SS) set out to round up, deport, and ultimately exterminate members of such “impure” races.[2] But removing these individuals was only part of the task. The Nazis needed to bring ethnic Germans to their new homes and, more importantly, indoctrinate

former German citizens who had adopted alien cultures after the Treaty of Versailles ceded German territory to other nations. This responsibility of “Germanization” fell to the women of the Third Reich. The thoughts and actions of these agents and witnesses are the focus of Harvey’s study.

Presenting a genealogy of female activity in the East, Harvey first outlines the roots of female German missionary activity in order to highlight two things—the attitudes of such women toward foreign societies and the evolution of women’s roles before the National Socialist seizure of power.[3] Under the Imperial government, women sought to bring the culture of the Fatherland into Eastern Europe and German colonies abroad. Many such women ventured into these endeavors with impressions of German superiority. What they believed they found in the East and in the colonies—people lacking in order, hygiene, and efficiency, all qualities cherished by Germans—merely reinforced their preconceptions. But German women discovered something else in these foreign lands: their own “public sphere” (p. 4). Denied equality with their male counterparts in the Fatherland, female missionaries were given the task of making these supposed “backward” lands more German. True, their responsibilities lay almost solely in the “private sphere” (p. 4), but these women played an important role in

spreading the culture of their beloved nation. This importance was heightened by the fact that although women were still subordinate to their male missionary coworkers, they were seen as superior to not only colonized women, but also indigenous men. Germany's defeat in World War I and subsequent loss of its territory merely strengthened feelings of nationalism and instilled in such women a greater desire to reinstall their "advanced" culture back into former German possessions.

After January 1933, the Nazis made female work and its pivotal role of "Germanizing" the East into official doctrine. Propaganda stressed that the fight to instill "Germanness" in backward areas began in the home—the classroom headed by mothers teaching health, racial hygiene, language, and beliefs. Such propaganda sought to persuade German women of their critical role in the "Germanization" of the East. Some women went to the East to "restore the sense of national honour ... so wounded in [their] childhood and early youth" (p. 13) or to better their lives. Others went merely seeking adventure and romance. Finally, some women chose not to travel East at all, but were forced to go by the regime. But Harvey seeks not merely to highlight why women went East, but also what they saw, felt, and did while there. While most women found their preconceived notions of a superior Germany and a backward, filthy, disorganized East largely confirmed, some women felt genuine sympathy for their victims, although they avoided saying so in official reports.

Nevertheless, these women were in occupied Poland as representatives of a brutal, racist government. And they participated in activities designed to further the goals of that regime. Some women helped in the racial screening process and the selection of Germans, the resettlement of Germans into new homes, or the seizure and redistribution of Polish and Jewish property. Other women supported "Germanization" more passively. While some missionaries taught ethnic German children, instructing them to value the history of the Fatherland and the ethnic struggle in which its citizens were engaged, many other women advised the new adult inhabitants, instilling in them "Germanic" values of racial hygiene, physical fitness, and cleanliness. But no matter what their activities were, Harvey argues they all reinforced ideas of superiority of ethnic Germans over Eastern peoples.^[4] As such, even though Harvey refuses to judge explicitly, she implies that these women are somewhat deserving of blame for the Holocaust.

The reasoning behind Harvey's refusal to make such

a contention bluntly is the questionable strength of her most prevalent sources, the memoirs and official reports of the female colonizers. Despite their centrality to the topic, these sources are open to criticism, as Harvey herself admits. Women were not free to express their feelings openly toward the government or their work in official reports. Thus it is difficult to determine the mindsets of these women from contemporary documents. While memoirs provide a more candid picture of the "Germanization" of the East, many were written years afterwards, calling their accuracy into question. In order to strengthen her account, Harvey draws upon a vast array of NSDAP documents on the "Germanization" of Poland from archives in occupied territories and Berlin. She also uses extensive secondary literature to place the colonization of the East in context and to explain the roots of the German context of "otherness." Thus, while Harvey's primary sources may be questioned, there is no denying that they vividly describe women's views after 1945 of their experiences in the Nazi East. They testify to the ways that emotionally powerful events influence people's thinking through the remainder of their lives. Based on such source critiques, however, Harvey rightly limits her thesis to what her evidence allows her to contend—that these women, no matter their work, aided discrimination against non-Germans whether they wanted to or not.

Harvey's greatest contribution is the reply she formulates to the ongoing question of how apparently "humane" citizens could engage in inhumane acts. To answer the question of why ethnic German settlers did not resist resettlement in the homes of victims, Harvey argues that new inhabitants knew their stays in the East depended on cooperation with Nazi representatives in occupied Poland. Furthermore, these settlers relied on the Party to supply not only their primary needs, but also protection from the non-German inhabitants of the area. Any failure on the part of ethnic Germans to conform to National Socialist policies could result in either discontinuation of assistance, or worse, loss of their new land. Thus Harvey reveals that many Germans allowed their desire to protect their livelihoods to outweigh their consideration of the well-being of others.

Harvey's coherent analysis occasionally avoids tackling other questions which could strengthen her arguments, however. For example, she spends a great deal of time on women's attempts to bring "Germanness" into the lives of women in occupied Poland, but makes no real mention of men living in these areas. Even if most young and middle-aged men were in the military, male

children and older men must have lived in these areas. If so, how did the women of the Nazi East deal with them? Certainly they could not indoctrinate such men on matters relegated by the Nazis to the female sphere. Similarly, female school teachers could not have instructed male and female children in the same manner, since they were meant to mature into separate spheres. The reader of the book also wonders how working with men altered women's feelings of superiority over ethnic and border Germans. It would be interesting to learn whether they maintained their feelings of superiority (as they did in nineteenth-century colonies) or whether interactions drew their sense of heightened superiority into question. Addressing such issues would help reinforce Harvey's contentions that German women carved out their own spheres in the East.

While the early pages on the roots of German discrimination against and feelings of superiority toward foreigners provide a strong foundation for this study, Harvey neglects some important works in the area of the evolution of German concepts of superiority from the Wilhelmine era through World War I and Weimar. These include Woodruff D. Smith's *The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism* (1986) (which also obviously covers the Nazi years) and John Lowe's *The Great Powers, Imperialism and the German Problem, 1865-1925* (1994). Inclusion of analyses like these would have strengthened the groundwork of *Women and the Nazi East*. In addition, analysis of Vejas Liulevicius's *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I* (2000), particularly his chapter on the creation of German soldiers' outlook on the landscape of the East (aptly termed their "mindscape") would have buttressed Harvey's assessment of the evolution of German colonization (particularly her World War I segment). It could also have provided a male perspective for comparison with female constructions of the East.

Despite these drawbacks, Harvey's argument that women who participated in the Nazi indoctrination of the East—whether as agents or merely witnesses—all knowingly played some role in the discrimination and exploitation of non-Aryans is both well-evidenced and con-

vincing. While the SS ultimately robbed millions of the "racially impure" of their lives, female German missionaries first robbed thousands of their homes, possessions, and dignity. As Claudia Koonz has argued and as Harvey implies, "millions of average [German] women ... contributed to the inversion of time-honored moral injunctions like 'Thou shalt not kill,' and 'Love thy neighbor.'" [5] The women of the Nazi East were among them.

Notes

[1]. One thinks of Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin's, 1987); Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, Marion Kaplan, eds., *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984); and Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany* (London: Pearson, 2001). More specific studies include Alison Owings, *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Hal Jetter, *Women of the Swastika* (Evanston: Regency Books, 1963); and Anna Maria Sigmund, *Women of the Third Reich* (Richmond Hill: NDE Publishing, 2000).

[2]. For studies of the SS units largely responsible for deportations and mass executions, see Richard Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 2002); Heinz Hoehne, *The Order of the Death's Head: The Story of Hitler's SS* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2000); and Daniel Patrick Brown, *Camp Women: The Female Auxiliaries who Assisted the SS in Running the Nazi Concentration Camp System* (Atglen: Schiffer Publishing Limited, 2002).

[3]. An excellent look at women and their role in German colonialism is Lora Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884-1945* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

[4]. The pivotal work on the West's view of eastern peoples as inferior or "other" is Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

[5]. Koonz, p. 7.

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