REVIEW ESSAY: Nazi Feminists?¹

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Several hooks, some of them painful, drag me towards books about Nazism: my Jewishness and my ancestors, some of them victims and some survivors of the 'holocaust'; and my concern about the anti-feminist roots of right-wing and fascistic movements. Claudia Koonz's book, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York: St Martin's Press 1987), as I expected, is rich with insights about the relation between the reaction to women's political and economic power, and conservatism and authoritarianism. I did not expect that it would raise troubling questions about feminism itself.

Koonz discusses many aspects of women's participation in Nazi life, but focuses particular attention on women in Nazi women's organizations. Over four million women participated in the *Frauenwerk*, Nazi government-sponsored women's activities; five million belonged to the women's division of the Nazi Labour Front; two million were leaders in the network of *Frauenschaft* organizations. The Nazi purpose in encouraging such organization was to mobilize women for all aspects of the Reich's programmes: production; social control; 'purification of the race'; war. Nevertheless, many of these women joined in the belief that they were thereby working for the advancement of women. They believed that promoting and then lauding the womanly virtues and contributions – motherhood and service above all – could provide for women the respect they deserved. Women leaders often protested the slighting of women's interests by Nazi party and government, and boasted of their achievements for women. Indeed, one of Koonz's central arguments is that women joined these organizations for many of the same reasons they have joined progressive and feminist movements: they were rebelling against the low status and confinement of women's conventional role and were seeking recognition, an arena for political activism and power. She does not dismiss these conservative women as dupes of men, inauthentic to a true female character, but insists on a degree of genuine conviction among them.

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This argument – indeed the whole project – takes risks, and I initially wondered if she could carry it off. Koonz attempts to see the world from the perspective of these often repulsive characters. Victims and resisters are relatively peripheral, although the book contains two substantial chapters with important new material about Jewish and

non-Jewish victims, about women's role in resistance. There are intellectual as well as moral disadvantages in seeing problems from the point of view of oppressors, because their perspective is even more myopic and self-serving than average. The perspective of Nazi women is particularly mystified because they supported one of the most woman-hating regimes of the modern world. Yet Koonz had to adopt, however temporarily, the perspective of her subjects, because not to do so would have limited her insight and minimized the depth of analysis. Much critical work about oppressors is disappointing because it is limited to muck-raking, listing atrocities and corruptions, failing to uncover deeper meanings. Koonz's book easily overwhelmed all my misgivings.

Koonz maintains distance by interlacing the perspective of her subjects with her own, author's voice. In an extraordinary opening she describes her discovery in 1980 that Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, chief of the Nazi Women's Bureau, was still alive. (She found Scholtz-Klink's book in a feminist bookstore in Berlin, a store that did not carry Richard Evans' good history of German feminism because it was written by a man.) Scholtz-Klink agreed to an interview. Doubting whether this important ex-Nazi would speak openly, Professor Koonz expected denial, evasion and contrition. Instead Scholtz-Klink was loquacious and opinionated, offering advice to contemporary leaders.

'You know, if our politicians learned from the past, they would not have to complain about the unruly youth of today. Why don't they ask us for advice on social problems? . . . In the Depression, we sponsored a national labor service that took teenagers off the streets and taught them patriotism . . . Mitterand is on the right track, but he doesn't go far enough. He created a ministry for women's rights. My own women's division concerned itself with women's responsibilities. . . .' 'Then you were not concerned about Hitler's policies on the Jews?' 'Of course, we never intended that so many Jews would disappear. I had grown up in an anti-Semitic family so the ideas did not seem unusual . . . Besides, until the war with Russia, all of our policies were strictly legal.'

Once she had sent money to a Jewish woman who went into exile. 'What ingratitude! After I helped her out . . . she publicly accused me after the war . . .'

Koonz soon realized that she was not interviewing an ex-Nazi, but a Nazi. This presentism pervades *Mothers in the Fatherland*. Nothing in the book is safely past. In its meanings for feminism, Jewishness and the appraisal of conservatism, the book seems to send periodic projectiles, many of them sharp, into the present. There is pain in reading this, not mainly from the description of atrocities, but from having certain intellectual comforts torn away, as if an old and beloved quilt is being shredded.

One such loss is the idea that there is something about femaleness that can insulate us from Nazism and its like. For 200 years, one strain of feminism has emphasized the moral superiority of women. This is not

necessarily a biologicistic view; many modern feminists believe that women have been *made* different from men, but that these differences are nevertheless deep and thorough. Women have been acculturated, they argue, to be more nurturing, less violent, less aggressive, more co-operative than men. The history of Nazi women belies or at least limits such views: there were many women responsible for substantial brutality, and many more enthusiastically supported men's brutality. Indeed, adopting for the moment the view that men and women are deeply different, one might say that as the masculine style (at its worst) produces violence and brutality, so the female style (at its worst) produces the submission to authority that is an equally important base for fascistic regimes. Hitler himself believed that his regime, the obedience and adoration he required, depended on the feminization of the population.

'Someone who does not understand the intrinsically feminine character of the masses will never be an effective speaker. Ask yourself, what does a woman expect from a man? Clearness, decision, power, and action . . . Like a woman, the masses fluctuate between extremes . . . The Crowd is not only like a woman, but women constitute the most important element in an audience. The women usually lead, then follow the children and at last . . . follow the fathers.'²

If femaleness does not protect us from Nazism, what about feminism? Germany had a relatively strong feminist movement – not, perhaps, as strong as in the US but stronger than elsewhere in Europe. Why, then, was there no evidence of feminist or woman-centred resistance to the Nazi takeover? Koonz tells many ugly stories of women's organizations agreeing without protest to the expulsion of their Jewish members, for example. Part of the answer lies in the fact that the German women's movement was deeply split between its bourgeois-liberal and its socialist varieties. The former organizations were so driven by their class interests that they could not experience the world through the eyes of their poorer sisters. Putting it another way, their feminism, like all feminisms, had class as well as gender content. Another historian of German women, Renate Bridenthal, has written about the Reichsverband Deutscher Hausfrauenvereine (German Housewives' Association, RDH), part of the main umbrella organization of the German women's movement, the primary purpose of which became resisting unionization and higher wages among domestic servants.³ Many working-class German women were organized into socialist women's organizations, but these tended to follow the Socialist and Communist Party strategies and did not promote an independent feminist opposition to Nazism.

These class and religious divisions may explain the lack of unified resistance, but they do not explain why so many women activists were attracted in the first place to Nazism, a political movement with an openly anti-feminist platform. It stood for the submission of wives to

husbands, the restriction of women to domesticity, the exclusion of women from the public sphere. During the war, Koonz relates, Hitler called upon SS men to produce as many illegitimate babies as possible, and asked the women's organizations to endorse this project. Himmler told the SS, who numbered three million, "The greatest gift for the widow of a man killed in battle is always the child of the man she has loved." (Disaffected women bitterly punned on the initials of the League of German Girls [*Bund deutscher Madel*, BDM], calling it *Bedarfsartikel deutscher Manner* [useful things for German men], *Bund deutscher Milchkuhe* [League of German Milk Cows], or '*Baldur, druck mich*' ['Baldur, take me' – referring to the head of the Hitler Youth, Baldur von Schirach].)

This is not to say that there was no gender gap in Nazi support. Before the panic caused by the Depression, the women's Nazi vote was 50 per cent lower than men's. In 1932 the male membership in the Hitler Youth outnumbered girls' by almost two to one. These differentials, however, disappeared by the end of the 1930s, and the reasons for this equalization deserve further study.

The most delicate part of Koonz's interpretation is her identification of elements in Nazi ideology that were attractive to some aspects of feminist sensibility. A pause here to describe what I mean by feminism is necessary, for it is important not to overstate what Koonz means or what I infer from her work. As an historian I have been forced by the evidence to adopt a definition of feminism broad enough to encompass a great variety of changing feminisms, movements whose common denominator is their belief that women are improperly subordinated and disrespected, and that something can and should be done about it. I do not for a moment suggest that the Nazi women leaders were feminists; the title of this article is wholly ironic. The Nazi women themselves considered feminism their main enemy, and did not agree that women were subordinated. Nevertheless, in some of their grievances and programmes they were like some types of feminists, and it is difficult to define the boundary. The entrance of women into a wage-labour force and into modern politics produced resentments among women themselves against the devaluation of their domestic and maternal labour. The conservative ideology that women *should* be maternal and domestic can appear as an expression of respect for women and for the maternal and domestic arena. And vice versa, expressions of respect for women's domestic labour and nurturing capacities often contain disapproval of women who choose otherwise. There is a feminist orientation which calls for greater respect for women precisely on the basis of their traditional roles, and looks askance at women who desert these roles, suspecting them of being 'male-identified'.

In Germany the contribution of this sort of feminism to conservatism, even military expansionism, can be seen in the history of the term '*lebensraum*'. Literally 'living room', the phrase came to be associated with the Nazi justification for eastward territorial

expansion, but had been used earlier by the bourgeois women's rights movement to refer to a woman-dominated space – nurturing, refined, insulated from the masculine world of money and politics. It was women's responsibility to protect this space for Germany and to nurture the men who would create this 'civilized' space for Germans in 'barbaric' Czechoslovakia, Poland and the Ukraine.

Feminism is not only complex and varied but also contains contradictory perspectives: some feminisms emphasize women's difference from men, others assert their essential, human similarity; some call for ending the sexual division of labour and gender difference, and some prefer to claim and defend different roles for men and women. At its edges feminism shades imperceptibly into non-feminist assertions of women's power. One may disagree with many, but I would be loathe to label any of these movements inauthentic without a serious attempt to understand their motivation. In some of the most conservative, intolerant rantings, we may nevertheless recognize the same thwarted but unstilled aspirations that drive our own movements. The goal is not reconciliation, but a better explanation of conservative women's activism.

Recognizing these political differences helps identify women's different interests – even, perhaps more importantly, ambivalence and conflicting interests within individual women. Industrial societies have presented women with countervailing pressures, even double binds: women's employment, economic independence and public-sphere activity represent both opportunity and increased burdens and dangers. Women's new roles, combined with the continuation of traditional responsibilities for child-raising and domestic labour, offer both autonomy and new forms of exploitation. Naturally women had differing and ambivalent responses.

The ambivalence in women's situation is a problem not only for feminists. It may be one of the important conditions of modern conservative politics. Another message of Koonz's book is that widespread anxiety about the place of women – and also therefore about masculinity – pervaded the whole society, male as well as female, the powerful as well as the powerless. Koonz shows that this anxiety was fundamental, intense and extremely influential in the rise and maintenance of Nazism. She uses to great effect a survey of working-class Germans conducted by Erich Fromm just before the Depression. Virtually the only finding that surprised him was the vehement reaction against women's changing roles. People not only complained about bobbed hair, make-up and women's employment, but they also blamed most social problems on these changes. Presciently, Fromm wrote, '“Here is an opportunity for political propaganda writers . . . to use for their purposes.”'¹⁴

The Nazi promise to restore women to their place in the family, and thereby to restore stability to the family and authority to men, was a vital part of its appeal, as it has been in many conservative social movements. As Koonz suggests, the apparent traditionalism of Nazi

family policy helped mask the radicalism of its other policies. Moreover, as in the US today, the accommodation of liberal, socialist and even feminist movements to these mythically nostalgic yearnings weakens their ability to resist conservative and authoritarian 'solutions'.

This gender analysis of Nazism – seeing it, in part, as a movement for the restoration of patriarchy – offers insights about anti-Semitism, particularly connexions between anti-feminism and anti-Semitism. The rhetoric of conservatism is rich with such connexions: Jewishness = modernism, individualism, cosmopolitanism, internationalism – all of them the breeding ground of women's rights. As Gottfried Feder, an early Nazi ideologue, put it, "The insane dogma of equality led as surely to the emancipation of the Jews as to the emancipation of women. The Jew stole the woman from us . . ." But these connexions must not be oversimplified. German gentile feminists did not see anti-Semitism as hostile to their own interests. Judaism has been as patriarchal as the other religions. Some Jews, particularly those of the business class, were attracted to Nazism themselves, and for the same reasons as gentiles of their class: an approval of authority, order, German nationalism and family stability. (This attraction to Nazism has been neglected in discussions of why German Jews were so slow to believe the Nazi threat to them.) And the Nazis were as hostile to other groups, not particularly associated with individualism and modernity, which threatened their domination; a case in point is the Jehovah's Witnesses who were near unanimous in their total non co-operation. Still, Hitler's greatest personal intensity and consistency was arguably his anti-Semitism, and the success of this hate in organizing German support can hardly be considered marginal.

Of course Nazism was by no means consistently anti-modernist, committed as it was to the rapid development of military and industrial technology. (Gottfried Feder, whose attacks on Jewish finance capital were so influential in the 1920s, was later expelled from the party for his anti-capitalism.) Koonz shows, in fact, that the Nazi regime was unable to turn around even those modernizing, feminist tendencies it most deplored. The birth rate, for example, never even rose to equal that of the pre-Nazi 1920s, despite the government's incentives to maternity. The abortion rate rose, which can be taken as an indicator of the overall birth control rate. The divorce rate increased faster than the marriage rate. Nazi social conservatism had aimed not only to restore male authority over women, but also parental authority over children, and that too failed. On the contrary, the Nazi ideological and patriotic mobilization subjected children to influences independent of their parents, even encouraging defiance. The Nazi leadership found itself in a double bind with respect to women's employment: during the war, facing a serious labour shortage, managers still found it hard to coerce women into the factories because they were faced with contradictory policies which lauded and rewarded domesticity. Hitler's rigidity regarding traditional sex roles continued to the end, and the war only redoubled his view that women were more valuable to the state in

maintaining men's domestic privileges, than for their own industrial labour.

Ironically, the Nazi regime itself hastened the destruction of this idealized domesticity. It did so through its expansion of state control of many apparently private activities: through its eugenics and reproduction policies, its drive for ideological conformity, its control over youth. This contradiction appears most intensely in the activities of organized Nazi women. There is always an irony inherent in the role of conservative women activists who spend their lives travelling, speaking in public and vying for public power as they instruct other women to make domesticity and the private sphere their first priority. They joined a movement that directed women to a special, exclusively private role, but which also called upon women to mobilize and provide public leadership towards achieving those ends. The contradiction is not simply in the mixed motives of the Nazi women; it is a contradiction in the very nature of conservative politics in a period of women's emancipation.

Koonz's book is sprinkled with implicit comparisons with the contemporary right. To articulate them is tricky, because the specialness of the time and place of Nazism was extremely important. (I wish Koonz had been more explicit, because her conclusions would likely be more informed than mine.) For example, the pro-family content of Nazi ideology is very similar to that found in virtually all socially conservative movements – nineteenth-century anti-woman suffrage campaigns, early twentieth-century 'social purity', Italian fascism, Vichy patriotism, the contemporary 'Moral Majority'. Yet the intensity of the Nazi panic against women's 'selfishness', men's 'emasculatation' and women's 'mannishness' was unparalleled. During the Depression in the US, there was also a pro-family reaction against women's employment, sexual freedom, birth control and cultural modernism, but it did not provoke so much nationalism, racism, anti-feminism and anti-communism as in Germany. (The closer resemblance is to the US in the 1950s, when those tendencies were more virulent, but, in part because of a healthier economy, they did not become a mass movement.)

Two generalizations arising from this book can safely be ventured. First, anxieties about the erosion of traditional gender arrangements can contribute to mass susceptibility to authoritarian solutions. Indeed, among all the anxieties created by the destruction of peasant society and its patriarchal order, and its replacement by big cities, industrial labour and individualist values, those associated with women's new roles and claims to individual rights are often most vivid. In the US the most consistently controversial domestic issues for the last 150 years have been women's rights and reproductive rights. Second, women too have anxieties about these changes, and the process of modernization has by no means meant reliable and steady improvements for women. While women's movements have in the main been more progressive (that is, leaning more towards greater democracy, equality and civil liberties) than men's, there is no guarantee that this is always the case

and many women have been attracted by authoritarian promises to restore traditional (albeit usually mythical) stability.

If there are lessons here, they include reminders that the enemy is within us as well as outside us. The vulnerability and manipulability of the citizenry is a function of anxieties already present in us, created in large part by instability in 'personal' life – family and community. Conservatives are not entirely wrong in viewing women's individual aspirations as hostile to family stability on the old terms (for example, coercive marriage and childbearing, male authority often enforced by male violence). But return to 'traditional' family is not possible – any more than during the Nazi regime. We must expect repeated bouts of intense reactionary responses to these instabilities until there is some new modicum of stability – which can only be achieved on the basis of recognizing women's aspirations.

Koonz's book reveals the limitations of the work of liberal and socialist feminists in Weimar Germany. Both groups focused on individual reforms – absolutely necessary reforms, such as political rights, legalized contraception and abortion, equal pay, homosexual rights – but neither offered a coherent vision of a new society based on sexual equality and freedom. They could not conceive of new bases of stability. That task remains ours today: to articulate a society that meets people's needs for stability as well as adventure, community as well as individual freedom, difference without domination.

Notes

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- 1 A different version of this essay will appear in *Tikkun*, a US Jewish magazine.
- 2 From a letter by Hitler to Ernst (Putzi) Hanfstaengl, quoted by Koonz, p. 66.
- 3 Bridenthal's article can be found in an excellent anthology on this topic, *When Biology Became Destiny. Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (New York: Monthly Review Press/New Feminist Library, 1984). Edited by Bridenthal, Grossmann and Kaplan, this volume includes Bridenthal's piece, a powerful selection from Koonz's book, a study of anti-Semitism within the feminist movement in Germany by Marion Kaplan, Atina Grossmann's excellent piece on the politics of abortion in Germany, and several good narratives of Jewish and gentile women's resistance, along with approximately ten other fine articles. It is available in paperback.
- 4 This was in his 1936 *Arbeiter und Angestellte am Vorabend des Dritten Reiches*, part of *Studien über Autorität*.