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“Kinder, Küche, und Kirche”: Women’s Work in the Third Reich

A Senior Paper

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Introduction

Conversations and research about the Nazi regime during World War II often focus on the horrors of the Holocaust and male perpetrators—Adolf Hitler, his officers, and troops. The role women played in Germany during World War II has not been studied to the same extent, in part due to how underplayed their contributions to the war effort were during, and immediately after the war. Ten to twenty years after the war ended in 1945, historians took an interest in what German women did to change the course of the war. There is an obvious contradiction between German women's propagandized role in Nazi Germany as mothers and wives and their actual political and military influence in World War II. The true story has slowly developed however and there are clear shifts in the focus of research on Nazi women since the examination began in the mid-1950s, to our current knowledge of them today.

During World War II, between 1939-1945, women in the west outside of Germany were generally not required to bear arms, but took up an active role in the war effort nonetheless. In 1941 Britain for example, British women aged 18-60 were required to register themselves and record their family occupations. After an interview, the women were required to choose from a range of jobs to help in the fight against Germany.¹ Many women volunteered for civil defense services like the Air Raid Precautions (ARP) and the Women's Voluntary Services (WVS). Similarly, American women enlisted in the war effort after they heard of the incredible war stories that men reported and wanted to make a difference overseas as well. In January of 1943, over 90 percent of women recruits listed patriotism and education as their motivation for joining

¹ Carol Harris, "Women Under Fire in World War Two," *BBC*, accessed February 7, 2018. http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/britain_wwtwo/women_at_war_01.shtml.

the force instead of the assumed “glamour and adventure” of war.² Women in the West were beginning to evolve and take active roles in more masculine activities and jobs during the World Wars – and their help was sought and praised by their countrymen and government.

The NSDAP, or the National Socialist German Workers Party, in Germany rejected this “new woman” and felt that a woman at war should stay home and fulfill her domestic duties by rearing children and keeping the home pristine for their husbands return. While propaganda perpetuated this ideal, however many German women were unconventional. Some actively aided in the war effort, both domestically and militarily, while others resisted the Nazi regime.

Literature Review

Women were publicly instructed to remain in the house and tend to children in Nazi Germany, yet there is a plethora of evidence showing that many women rejected that stereotype and willfully joined and fought for and against the Nazi Party in its mission to rule Germany. Claudia Koonz’s 1987 book, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, explains how German women took control of their environments and took advantages of opportunities to participate in Nazi politics. Through extensive secondary source research and interviews with female activists during the war, Koonz discusses the enthusiastic role women took in the Nazi regime and their shocking absence of remorse for their actions. Koonz describes the treatment of women as “secondary racism,”³ and focuses on the role these women played in fighting against, or ultimately joining the Nazis. Koonz paints a picture of the treatment German women in positions of power or influence endured during World War II. Koonz’s book shifted the discussion of women in Nazi

² Mary Weaks-Baxter, *We are a College at War: Women Working for Victory in World War II*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 119.

³ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 429.

Germany to focus on their active participation in the Third Reich and the discrimination they faced during World War II.

Mothers in the Fatherland is a “feminist history”⁴ that raises a lot of questions about women in Germany between 1939 and 1945. Unfortunately, the author herself, Claudia Koonz, includes several factual inaccuracies that have been noted by multiple historians reviewing her work. These mistakes include blatant misspelling of well-known authors and estimating that in 1932 the Nazi party had eight hundred fifty thousand members, not 1.5 million.⁵ This misinformation puts the factual evidence from Koonz into question, but her thesis and ideas about women in the Nazi Germany are time-tested and studied today. Koonz helped establish that women in World War II Nazi Germany took an active role in Nazi politics, despite Nazi propagandas portrayals to the contrary. Following Koonz’s research, numerous historians have examined the role women played in German politics during this time.

While women were welcome to join the Nazi Party in Germany as regular paying members, in theory official roles such as judges, soldiers, and statesmen were to be filled by only men.⁶ Australian historian Anna Sigmund’s 2000 book *Women of the Third Reich*, examines the female Nazi elites’ official and unofficial role in the Third Reich. Sigmund’s research focuses on eight fascinating women who helped Nazi regime and supported Hitler’s endeavors. Sigmund writes “These women were the best propagandists the party had; they persuaded their husbands to join Hitler’s cause, sacrificed their spare time to their political enthusiasm... committed themselves selflessly to the party’s interests.”⁷ Sigmund examines Hitler’s assistant’s wives and

⁴ “Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics (Book Review),” *The American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 727.

⁵ *Ibid*, 728.

⁶ Anna Maria Sigmund, *Women of the Third Reich*, (Richmond Hill, Ont: NDE Pub., 2000), 8.

⁷ *Ibid*, 9.

brings to light their complicity in the actions of their husbands. She makes an effort to remain neutral in her research and Sigmund makes sure to not assume guilt by association in any of the comprehensive biographies. In a field where most research is done on the principal male perpetrators of World War II, Sigmund changes the discussion to focus not only on women in general, but the role *elite* women played in the war's politics. Thus, Sigmund shifts the discussion from the expectations of women, to their actual role in the war. Koonz and Sigmund discuss ideas about women and their political power in Nazi Germany, which had seen limited discussion as early as 1960.

Earlier work about women in the Nazi regime tended to focus on more generalized analysis of women aviators as pioneers in the world of women's work. Herve Lauwick's 1960 *Heroines of the Sky*, for example, presents an all-encompassing view of the female pioneers of aviation, in and out of military context. This book includes an overview of the career and feats of Hanna Reitsch, a civil and military test pilot in Nazi Germany, and glider champion of the world for a time. A celebrity, as well as a Nazi, Reitsch is the focus of many works on female pilots—and female Nazis.

Another important, yet more generalized study on female pilots is Judy Lomax's 1987 *Women of the Air*. In this book, Lomax traces the history of female pilots from World War II to current commercial flight, including the impact these women had on the field of aviation. Once again, the famous German pilot Reitsch is mentioned and described as a woman who influenced the female role in military flight. Bernhard Rieger's article "Hanna Reitsch (1912-1979): The Global Career of a Nazi Celebrity" and Jean Allman's article "Kwame Nkrumah, a Nazi Pilot named Hanna, and the Contingencies of Postcolonial History-Writing" both discuss the career of Reitsch and the influence she held in Germany and elsewhere as a famous female test pilot. Both

of these articles were written during the last ten years and the authors have found plenty of sources detailing Reitsch's impact on her audiences due to her being a woman with military prowess in Germany. Although both articles focus only on Reitsch, they shift the discussion from German women and their role in the military to political changes occurring at the time that required women to enter the war.

Evelyn Zegenhagen's 2009 article "German Women Pilots at War 1939 to 1945," narrows the discussion to focus on Reitsch and other important female flyers who had not been recognized during the height of their careers. In her research, Evelyn makes a comparison between the Germany and the United States regarding female pilots in the military and how the two countries viewed females participating in the military. Whether it be the United States or Nazi Germany, women had a role to fill as "domestic goddesses,"⁸ but this was not always the case. Zegenhagen discusses the 1935 Reich Labor Service Law, which prepared German women in case of war, assigning them to civilian administration tasks that were inferior to those of men.⁹ Unsurprisingly, the increase in technology made the inclusion of women in the war effort unavoidable. Zegenhagen contrasts the preparation of women for domestic duties to the rigid training some women underwent in the 1930s to prepare for war.

With Reitsch again the main focus, Maureen Goss's dissertation "Hanna Reitsch: Shaping the Image of a Third Reich Heroine" connects the idea that Reitsch, as a celebrity, got more recognition for her work as pilot and her political influence was therefore overlooked. The "mythological" view of women as pilots during World War II overshadowed what they did to aid

⁸ A woman with exceptional domestic skills including cleaning, preparing meals, and rearing children.

⁹ Evelyn Zegenhagen, "German Women at War 1939 to 1945," *Air Power History* 56 (Winter 2009): 12-13.

in the war effort in Germany. Goss discusses how Reitsch gained celebrity status and was even credited with others' aviation feats due to her popularity.¹⁰ This focused research is echoed in Dennis Piszkiewicz's book *From Nazi Test Pilot to Hitler's Bunker: The Fantastic Flights of Hanna Reitsch*. In this book, Piszkiewicz examines Reitsch's career as a female pilot in Nazi Germany while discussing her relationship with Adolph Hitler, particularly the bond of friendship between them. Both of these works shed light not only on Reitsch's career as a test pilot, but on what she did politically as a woman in Nazi Germany.

Clare Mulley's recent 2017 book *The Women Who Flew for Hitler: A True Story of Soaring Ambition and Searing Rivalry* takes the previous discussion and puts it into context of women sharing these titles with other women. Mulley focuses primarily on Reitsch's and Melitta von Stauffenberg's defiance to domestic living and their careers as test pilots during World War II. By comparing the two women, Mulley highlights their stark differences and attitudes towards the Third Reich. Von Stauffenberg, born within the Kingdom of Poland, sported dark hair and a hidden Jewish background, while Hanna captured the attention of the public with her blond hair and blue eyed Aryan qualities.¹¹ Thus, the discussion shifts again to focus on two women that made their names in Nazi aviation, but equally impacted German politicst. Both women actively worked with Nazi party members and took part in propaganda promoting the war in Germany, showing the influence they gained as female pilots.

Historians research on German women in World War II has evolved since the war ended in 1945. Shortly after the war, histories were very generalized and spoke briefly about the role

¹⁰ Maureen Goss, "Hanna Reitsch: Shaping the Image of a Third Reich Heroine," (PhD diss., Boston University, 1996).

¹¹ Clare Mulley, *The Women Who Flew for Hitler: A True Story of Soaring Ambition and Searing Rivalry* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2017), 3.

women played in the regime. As time has progressed, research has gotten more detailed and the extent of women's roles in Nazi politics and military involvement is being brought to light by many historians. The field still has room to grow and find more evidence of extraordinary women that pushed the boundaries of their expected domestic roles in Germany. It is now clear that women in Nazi Germany did much more for the war effort than what was portrayed in Nazi funded propaganda. This paper picks up this story by examining Nazi propaganda and specific examples of women that challenged the expected roles on women in Germany during World War II.

Prelude to World War II

On June 28, 1919, World War I ended with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, ending the state of war between Germany and the Allied Powers. In article 231, or the War Guilt clause, Germany was forced to accept responsibility for causing "all the loss and damage" that occurred during World War I.¹² Germany was forced to neutralize, make territorial concessions, strictly limit the size of its future army and Navy, and make reparation payments estimated between \$33 billion and \$56 billion. The Treaty of Versailles was harsh; it crippled Germany's economy and almost guaranteed future conflict in Europe.¹³ In reaction, the Nazi Party (the NSDAP), founded by Anton Drexler, arose in 1920. The party was created to unite Germany again after their terrible loss in World War I and take back the land and wealth they once possessed.

In 1920, the 25-point manifesto, written by Adolf Hitler and Anton Drexler was published for the National Socialist German Workers' Party (the Nazis). Primarily written to

¹² Treaty of Versailles, 1919," *Treaty of Versailles, 1919*, Article 231, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 2, 2018).

¹³ Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty!: An American History. Volume 2, From 1865* (New York; London: W. W. Norton and company, 2017), 772.

explain the fifth chapter of the second volume of *Mein Kampf*, Hitler wanted to provide guiding principles that put the interest of Germany at the forefront of Nazi thought, rather than the interest of the individual. The stark contrast of these statements and demands compared to the traditional politics practiced in the western world proved popular with the German people.¹⁴

Women from the Nazi's Perspective

The NSDAP had varying views of women's role in Nazi society, but could agree on few basic ideals. Women that were "Aryan" and "hereditarily healthy" were expected to marry equally healthy and successful German men, producing healthy Aryan children to populate Germany.¹⁵ The public sphere was not inviting for women and the NSDAP's leader, Adolf Hitler, adamantly supported this standard. In his speeches intended to rally support for the Nazi party, Hitler often stated that women had no place in the public or political sphere in Germany. Historian Jill Stephenson argues in her book *Women in Nazi Germany*, that at the 1934 Nuremberg Party Rally, Hitler addresses his view that men and women in German society had separate functions and that women should be confined to the "smaller world" of the home.¹⁶ The translated speech found in Stephenson's work supports this idea when Hitler says "We do not feel that it is right when a woman forces her way into a man's world, onto what is essentially his territory."¹⁷ The belief that women belonged in a separate world than men in the Nazi regime was supported throughout the NSDAP.

¹⁴ "Programme of the NSDAP, 24 February 1920," *Hitler Historical Museum*, accessed February 2, 2018, <http://www.hitler.org/writings/programme/>.

¹⁵ Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany* (Harlow; New York: Longman, 2001), 16.

¹⁶ Hitler's 1934 Nuremberg Party Rally Speech. *Ibid*, 141.

¹⁷ Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*, 142.

The idea that women were different from men went beyond the idea that they occupied different worlds, as seen in the way Hitler publicly paralleled women to the mentally retarded.¹⁸ In a collection of Hitler's speeches from 1941-1944, Hitler describes a woman who sticks her nose in politics as an abomination; women should not dabble in military matters because they are not qualified to pass that kind of judgment.¹⁹ Nazi theoretician and ideologue, Alfred Rosenberg wrote in his book titled *Der Mythus des XX [The Myth of the Twentieth Century]*, that women should have opportunities to develop themselves, but "Der Frau sollen also alle Möglichkeiten zur Entfaltung ihrer Kräfte offenstehen; aber über eines muß Klarheit bestehen: Richter, Soldat und Staatslenker muß der Mann sein und bleiben."²⁰ ("One thing must remain clear: judges, soldiers, and statesmen are, and will be, only men"). There was a general consensus among the NSDAP that women were innately different than men, psychologically and emotionally, making them unfit to participate in political matters.

Rosenberg believed that women were not capable of doing the same things as men were due to their innate "vegetative and subjective" nature. In *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, he writes ("Woman is woman by virtue of a certain lack of capability...this lack of capability is the consequence of a nature directed at the vegetative and the subjective...woman of all times and races lacks intuitive and intellectual vision.")²¹ Due to their lack of intellectuality and intuition, Rosenberg believed that women should remain submissive. His description of vegetative and

¹⁸ Sigmund, *Women of the Third Reich*, 14.

¹⁹ Adolf Hitler, *Monologe im Führerhauptquartier 1941-1944*. Die Aufzeichnungen Heinrich Heims, edited by Werner Jochmann. Hamburg, 1980.

²⁰ Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythus des XX [The Myth of the Twentieth Century]* (Hoheneichen Verlag, Munich, 1930), 174. Translated by Karin Crelling.

²¹ Ibid, 107.

submissive women prescribes their domestic role, to stay in the home and raise genetically sound children to support Aryan Germany.

The NSDAP encouraged German women to dutifully fulfill their roles as mothers and wives. The phrase “Kinder, Küche, und Kirche” or “children, kitchen, and church” was often used to describe the role of women in German society. While this concept of domesticity was not confined to Germany exclusively, the severity of enforcement in Nazi Germany far exceeded that found in the western world. The Nazi Party was obsessed with race and selective population growth, finding that the easiest and most efficient way to control the German population was to monitor marriage among men and women.²² The goal was to reproduce genetically sound Aryan children to strengthen the stock of Germany.

Historian Jill Stephenson discusses the laws passed in order to define the Nazi concept of desirable marriages and reproduction, including the “Marriage Health Law” and the “Nuremberg Laws of 15 September 1935.”²³ Couples were thereafter required to have a “Certificate of Suitability for Marriage” that assured the two had no infectious disease or genetic illnesses. Earlier laws encouraged marriages that would produce many genetically desirable children, like the “Law to Reduce Unemployment,”²⁴ which provided 600 interest-free marks to German Aryan couples on the condition that the wife quit her job and remained unemployed. This law specifically confined women to the domestic sphere and further limited them when a later law²⁵ promised the cancellation of one quarter of the loan for each child born from the union.

²² Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*, 27.

²³ Ibid, 28.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “Nazi Propaganda,” *United States Holocaust Museum*, accessed February 9, 2018, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005202>.

Laws like these further confined and limited German women's participation in Nazi politics, requiring them to stay at home and maintain their households in order to help increase the German Aryan population. Young women that did not marry and bear children soon after were considered depraved and antisocial for not contributing more genetically sound children to Germany, and ultimately, the NSDAP's ideal empire.



Figure 1. Phillip Zec, *Women of Britain Come into the Factories*, 1941. Poster. Source: Imperial War Museum Collections. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/38928>.

In other Western nations like Britain and America, men left their homes to fight in World War II and the women they left at home had to fill the positions they left. Propaganda encouraged women to take part in the war effort with physical labor. In Britain, the poster titled "Women of Britain: Come Into the Factories" by Phillip Zec in 1941, asked women to acquire jobs that would strengthen Britain and aid them in the war effort.²⁶ In the foreground, a woman wearing brown factory overalls stands in front of factories to her left and two tanks on her right. Above her, aircraft are silhouetted against an orange sky. This image was meant to conjure up

²⁶ Phillip Zec, 1941, *Women of Britain Come into The Factories*, Print (poster), Imperial War Museum Collections, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/38928>

feelings of purpose for the women left at home while their husbands and fathers left for war. Propaganda like this told them that they too could make a difference and aid in the effort, not stay at home and only fulfill their domestic duties. In America, the popular poster titled “We Can Do It!” or “Rosie the Riveter” by J. Howard Miller in 1943 depicts a strong female war production worker and was intended to boost worker morale of women in America during the war.²⁷



Figure 2. J. Howard Miller, *We Can Do It!*, 1943. Poster. Source: U.S. National Archives, NWDNS-179-WP-1563.

Propaganda for Women in Germany

Nazi Propaganda during World War II Germany presented Germany as the protector of Western culture, eliciting political loyalty and race consciousness among German citizens. As part of their vision, the Nazi regime sought to paint a picture for foreign governments around the world that Germany was a domestic utopia for women. Propaganda, particularly posters distributed throughout Germany, portrayed and encouraged women to remain in the domestic sphere while still actively supporting the Nazi regime. The poster titled “Mütter, berufstätige

²⁷ J. Howard Miller, 1943, *We Can Do It!*, Print (poster), U.S. National Archives, NWDNS-179-WP-1563.

Frauen - wir wählen National-Sozialisten Liste 8” (“Mothers, working women – we choose National Socialists List 8”) was created in 1932 by Felix Albrecht for the Prussian Landtag election in April 1932.²⁸ Its purpose was to encourage women to vote in the election, depicting three women, one holding a child, another dressed in an apron, and the third at the forefront filling out a voter’s ballot.

The poster shows the progression of women fulfilling their domestic duties of taking care of children and working in the kitchen, to their eventual participation in German elections. While the NSDAP wanted women to remain in the household, they knew that the large demographic of women in Germany would aid in them maintaining power during time of elections.

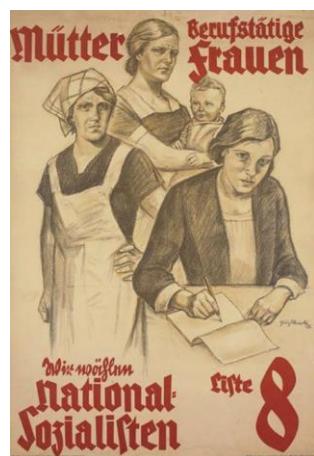


Figure 3. Felix Albrecht, *Mütter, berufstätige Frauen - wir wählen National-Sozialisten Liste 8*, 1932. Poster. Source: Library of Congress, digital image. LC-DIG-ppmsca-21994.

Another poster created by Albrecht titled “Wir Frauen wählen Liste 2 National-Sozialisten” (“We women choose List 2 National Socialists”)²⁹ was a political campaign poster for the Reichstag elections in 1932, depicting two “Aryan” women facing the viewer. The poster encourages German women to participate in the election in a manner similar to that of previous

²⁸ Felix Albrecht, 1932, *Mütter, berufstätige Frauen - wir wählen National-Sozialisten Liste 8*, print (poster), Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-21994.

²⁹ Felix Albrecht, 1932, *Mütter, berufstätige Frauen - wir wählen National-Sozialisten Liste 8*, print (poster), Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-18603.

poster by Albrecht. The poster limits itself to target only German Aryan women because their voting power to the Nazi cause was very valuable.

A poster created by Theo Matejko in 1941, called upon women to aid in the war effort with the striking words “*Hilf auch Du mit!*” (“You can help, too!”).³⁰ The image depicts three German women, one dressed in a blue-collar dress, another in an apron, and the third with a bandana holding a rake presumably for farming. Above them, a Nazi soldier looks stoically forward as the women walk. Since the war was at its peak and Germany desperately needed assistance, it was not rare to see propaganda encouraging women to aid in the war effort outside the domestic sphere but firmly on the homefront. Despite the actuality of many women physically entering the war, this poster omits military involvement and suggests that their main purpose was to support the Nazi party from their homes. The Nazi soldier standing over them wears a helmet and is clearly meant to represent the men fighting in the war, while the women represent those taking care of the home while they are away.



Figure 4. Theo Matejko, *Hilf auch Du mit!*, 1941. Poster. Source: Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-18524.

³⁰ Theo Matejko, 1941, *Hilf auch Du mit!*, print (poster), Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-18524.

Regardless of this widespread propaganda, many German women actively participated in their local Nazi women's groups despite the expectation they would stay home and maintain the household. The women that joined these NSDAP groups, collected money and goods for the cause, crafted and mended uniforms for soldiers, and administered first-aid for men.³¹ These kinds of feminine activities were considered suitable for women while activity in overt politics was left for men only. However, in 1931, the NSDAP's organization chief, Gregor Strasser, replaced those small women's groups with the National Socialists Frauenschaft.³² Within this group, many women sought more important and valued roles than the "womanly" and "domestic," finding it hard to gain leverage within the organization's strict rules. The majority of independent women's organizations were dissolved or brought under Nazi leadership in order to monitor their purpose and function.

German Women on the Homefront

Despite propaganda's portrayal of women as "domestic goddesses" caring for Germany's children while men were away at war, there were plenty of women who took active roles in the German military effort at home and elsewhere. Groups like the "Neighborhood Aid" section of the National Socialists Frauenschaft cleared up debris after bombings raids and performed first aid where it was needed. Stephenson notes that NSF women might reinforce Nazi laws or norms surrounding everyday life, for example ensuring that Jewish women not shop outside their prescribed hours or purchase prohibited goods.³³ Women ran practical classes on domestic duties and childcare, while the Mothers' Service section advised about children's diets and ran a

³¹ Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*, 84.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 104.

campaign against smoking and drinking by women.³⁴ These efforts to aid the war from home ended for the most part once the bombings and fighting progressed into Germany. The women's groups became dependent on depleting numbers of volunteers that continued to diminish as the war raged on, although propaganda pushing the cause continued until the end. German women ventured from their domestic spheres they were expected to conform to and supported their country through means outside of direct military involvement.

Many elite German women took active roles in Nazi politics through their husband's positions in the Nazi party or through relationships with other members of the party. The famous wife of powerful Nazi propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, broke the mold of "silent, domestic, Aryan woman" and avidly took part in Nazi politics. Johanna Maria Magdalena "Magda" Goebbels, was an ambitious woman who supported her husband and Adolf Hitler tirelessly throughout World War II. After admiring Goebbels' speeches, Magda joined her local NSDAP group in Berlin and became the leader of the local Nazi women's group.³⁵ Magda advanced further into the ranks of the National Socialists and became the deputy provincial administrator, acting as a representative for the Nazi party by responding to letters from German women about domestic matters and questions about the Regime.³⁶

Another influential elite woman, Henriette "Henny" von Schirach, was the daughter of Adolf Hitler's official photographer Heinrich Hoffman and one of the few women to challenge Hitler's persecution of Jews.³⁷ Having been raised in a staunch National Socialist household,

³⁴ Ibid, 105.

³⁵ Sigmund, *Women of the Third Reich*, 75.

³⁶ Toby Thacker, *Joseph Goebbels: Life and Death*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 179.

³⁷ Sigmund, *Women of the Third Reich*, 199.

Schirach joined the NSDAP after her wedding at age nineteen.³⁸ Schirach was concerned with education of the youth of Germany and never fully agreed with or supported the anti-Semitic aspects of the Nazi Party. From her bedroom window in 1943, Schirach witnessed the forceful deportation of Jewish women and children. Her friend Miedl sarcastically wondered “Are the Germans doing this? Does Hitler know about this?” and Schirach felt she should bring this to light with the Führer in case he was not aware. After confronting Hitler, he flew into a rage and claimed she was a sentimentalist who should pay no mind to the “Jewesses in Holland.” She replied, “Herr Hitler, you ought not be doing that.”³⁹ After that incident, Henriette and her husband were not banished from Hitler’s entourage, and Henriette then became one of the few people to speak up to Hitler directly about the deportation and poor treatment of Jews in Germany.

German Women in the Military

Women in Nazi Germany that broke the mold of domestic Aryan woman, despite their perceived roles of mothers and wives, included the famous Nazi test pilots Hanna Reitsch and Melitta von Stauffenberg. Reitsch was born in Hirschberg, Silesia in 1912 and began her flight training in 1932 at the School of Gliding in Grunau.⁴⁰ In 1937, Reitsch was drafted into the Luftwaffe, the aerial welfare branch of the German Wehrmacht military forces, where she tested gliders and many of Germany’s latest designs for war. Reitsch played a significant role in testing Nazi gliders and is described as having shared a strong bond with Hitler himself, even touching down in her aircraft near Hitler’s shelter in Berlin during his last moments.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid, 191.

³⁹ Ibid, 199.

⁴⁰ Hanna Reitsch, *The Sky My Kingdom: Memoirs of the Famous German World War II Test Pilot* (F.A. Herbig Verlagsbuchhandlung, Munich, 2009), 2.

⁴¹ Hervé Lauwick, *Heroines of the Sky* (London: F. Muller, 1960), 55.

In 1941, Reitsch test piloted the Junkers Ju 87 *Stuka* and Dornier Do 17 barrage balloon-cable fender project, a feat for which she received the Iron Cross, Second Class, from Hitler in 1941. She not only opened the field of aviation to women in Nazi Germany, she directly influenced Hitler in military decisions like Operation Suicide. The concept of suicide missions went against all European military traditions and evoked feelings of desperation and defeatism for many of the Nazi elite.⁴² Despite talk of undermining the morale of the German people being punishable by death, in 1943 Reitsch began to receive inquiries from pilots interested in sacrificing their lives for Hitler's Germany. In 1944, Reitsch presented her idea to Hitler and upon his approval, seventy pilots volunteered for the mission. Fortunately for the seventy volunteers, the plans for Operation Suicide were never implemented operationally because "the decisive moment had been missed." Reitsch was atypical in the role she played in Nazi Germany, challenging the NSDAP's idea of the proper German woman by testing the boundaries of women's role in the German military at the time.⁴³

Melitta von Stauffenberg did not exhibit desirable "Aryan" characteristics like Reitsch. While Reitsch was tall and blonde with bright blue eyes, Stauffenberg was the daughter of a Michael Schiller, the son of a Jewish fur-trading family. With dark brown hair and brown eyes, Stauffenberg did not stand out from the crowd the way Reitsch did, but she achieved equal aviation success in the Nazi military. In 1928, Stauffenberg started working for the German Luftwaffe but was released in 1936 due to her Jewish ancestry. Despite facing adversity because of her heritage, she continued working toward her goal of becoming a test pilot. This determination helped her save the Schiller family from deportation to concentration camps once the Nazi party took control of Germany. By conducting test dives in warplanes for the Luftwaffe,

⁴² Mulley, *The Women Who Flew for Hitler*, 196.

⁴³ Ibid.

Stauffenberg's contributions were considered very valuable to the war effort and in 1943 she was awarded the Iron Cross Second Class.⁴⁴

Due to her Jewish heritage, Stauffenberg admitted in diaries that she felt loyalty to Germany but did not agree with the National Socialists ideals.⁴⁵ The inner conflict between supporting the NSDAP and keeping her family safe tormented her during her time in the Luftwaffe. Stauffenberg contributed to the Nazi war effort and also inadvertently made a statement about allowing those of Jewish heritage to intermingle with Aryan elites. Despite her heritage, Stauffenberg made an impact with pure skill and determination, proving that the Nazi's propagandized ideal of women and Jews was not always the norm in World War II Germany.

German Women Against the War

Not all German women avidly supported the Nazi. Many actively resisted the Nazi regime and joined resistance movements, like the Red Orchestra that operated in Germany, France, Belgium, and Switzerland. The name was devised by the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA), which countered SS (Schutzstaffel) espionage. They referred to resistance operators as "pianists," their transmitters as "pianos," and their supervisors as "conductors."⁴⁶ The RSHA included three main espionage networks in the Red Orchestra: the Trepper Group in Germany, France, and Belgium, the Lucy Spy Ring in Switzerland, and the Schulze-Boysen/Harnack group in Berlin.

Within the Schulze-Boysen/Harnack group, a German woman named Greta Kuckhoff worked tirelessly with her husband Adam Kuckhoff to fight the Nazi reign over Germany. After

⁴⁴ Ibis, 200.

⁴⁵ Mulley, *The Women Who Flew for Hitler*, 198.

⁴⁶ Jeffery Richelson, *A Century of Spies Intelligence in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 149.

contacting Arvid and Mildred Harnack, two leading members of the Schulze-Boysen resistance group, the couple began committing acts of civil disobedience, convincing fellow Germans to oppose Nazism.⁴⁷ Greta worked translating Nazi Party speeches' radical racial policies. In 1939, she had begun an English translation of *Mein Kampf* in order to educate the British public about the horrors of Hitlers reign in Germany.⁴⁸ In 1942, the activities of the Red Orchestra were discovered and arrests began. On September 12, 1942, Greta was arrested by the Gestapo in her apartment, and a year later she was sentenced to death as an "accomplice to high treason and for failure to report a case of espionage." Luckily, her death sentence was lifted but she was still sentenced to ten years in prison, from which she was liberated from by the Red Army on May 8, 1945.

It is not fair to say that the actions of Greta as member of the Schulze-Boysen resistance group changed the course of history, but when combined with the total efforts of Red Orchestra, their actions are impressive. Greta fought the Nazi regime along with many other brave Germans, successfully showing fellow German citizens and the rest of the world what atrocities were occurring under the rule of the Third Reich. Greta broke the mold of the Nazi's ideal western woman and proved that it was possible as a woman to stand up against the NSDAP, even if it required committing espionage. Propaganda during World War II in Germany tried to paint a façade of total civil obedience of domestic Aryan women, but Greta is a clear example of women that resisted this expectation and challenged the NSDAP.

⁴⁷ Anne Nelson and Mazal Holocaust Collection, *Red Orchestra: The Story of the Berlin Underground and the Circle of Friends Who Resisted Hitler*, (New York: Random House, 2009), 250.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 253.

Conclusion

The NSDAP had strong expectations for German women during World War II. The contradictions between women's perceived roles in the war through propaganda and Nazi ideology, and women's true participation in the war effort is difficult to overlook. While the true stories of many German women have been revealed since the end of the war in 1945, there is still the general assumption that the typical Aryan German woman committed herself to domestic duties and awaited her husband's return home. The society desired by Hitler included physically healthy and racially pure women who followed the slogan of "Kinder, Küche, und Kirche," or "children, kitchen, church."

The idea of the "western woman" found in places like Britain and America during World War II challenged the Nazi party's idea of a woman's place in society, and Nazi propaganda clearly reflects this fear. The posters distributed during the war, picturing women dressed in aprons while holding children and filling out voter's ballots, emphasize the regime's detestation felt for women in other countries that ventured out of their domestic realms.

The totalitarian character of the Nazi regime put women on shelves and expected them to participate in World War II war efforts only on superficial levels. The Nazi party believed that women should remain in the domestic sphere and strengthen the German population from the homefront in times of war. This belief was reinforced with the idea that women were innately less than men, intellectually and physically. This Nazi standard is clearly emphasized in the propaganda released during World War II that pictured Aryan German tending to their proper domestic duties while the war raged on around them. With the evidence surfacing now about women's roles in Nazi German and women's roles in past societies in general, it is clear that

German women who wanted to participate in or against the Nazi regime, did so with bountiful strength and determination.

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