



Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics

Claudia Koonz

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National Book Award Nominee

American Library Association Notable Book

An Outstanding Book in Women's History at the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians

From the collapse of the Kaiser's regime to the destruction of Hitler in his bunker, Germany has been studied, explicated, and psychoanalyzed time and again. Yet there have been few detailed investigations into the historical and cultural roles played by German women in modern times. This important book, which "Kirkus" called "original and intriguing," corrects this imbalance.

Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics Details

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From Reader Review Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics for online ebook

Mutaz Ayesh says

Really interesting. the language is really attractive and was a pretty challenging book to read (since English is not my mother language. So many new words, so much new information, eye-opening about the oppression of women in addition to Jews. Loved it!

Valerie Horner says

Review Mothers in the Fatherland
By Claudia Koonz

Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics by Claudia Koonz is a fascinating and well written sociological look into how German women responded to Nazism during the Third Reich. It's a thick book and I didn't read every chapter, but those that I picked to read especially "Protestant Women for Fuhrer and Fatherland" I found to be especially valuable.

As I began this book I realized that most of the previous fiction and nonfiction literature I had read on the subject was from the point of view of the resisters of Nazism: The Diary of Anne Frank, The Hiding Place by Corrie Ten Boom, and other fictional works. My first introduction to Nazism was in 7th grade. My Jewish girlfriend Cathy Frank lent me a copy of Five Chimneys, and it was a shocking revelation to me as a very young woman on the depths of humanities depravity and cruelty. For some reason - now 40+ years later- the one scene that I clearly remember was the rejoicing of some of the concentration camp women when they found a discarded tube of toothpaste that had enough toothpaste left in it to use for a birthday celebration in lieu of cake.

Like most Americans. I am a descendant of Germans. I have almost ¾ German ancestry and like most Germans my family was well educated, hardworking, and successful. We thrived in the United States. Germans of the 19th Century were known for their passion, their dedication to the arts and philosophy, their humanitarianism, and their scientific advancements. So how was this brilliance so twisted by Nazism? Well this book doesn't answer that question, but without the support of millions of German women, the author shows that Nazism would have had a difficult time flourishing.

Claudia Koonz is an ardent feminist, so the book is written from this perspective. She says "In the 1930's many Europeans shared a panic about decline in birthrates, the decaying family and economic crisis" (177). The Nazis publically exalted motherhood and decried women in the workplace, but privately undercut this effort by harsh eugenic laws which took away individual's freedom of choice for marriage and family, by superseding the father's authority in the home by making the Nazi party the ultimate authority, and by requiring women to work outside of the home and for free for Nazi enterprises (178).

Germany was about half Catholic and half Protestant at this time - mostly Lutheran. 99% of the population attended church. The Catholics at the beginning opposed the eugenic laws of the Nazis, but many Protestant women adapted the Nazi ideals of selective breeding and forced sterilization of those considered undesirable for reproducing. (Margaret Sanger of Planned Parenthood fame was doing similar work in the US.) The two kingdom position of the Lutherans (and by the way the position of most US Protestants today) - that there is a secular kingdom and a heavenly kingdom who can have separate beliefs and behaviors yet still operate in harmony with each other, unwittingly gave Nazis more power than they otherwise would have had. What the Protestants didn't realize was Hitler's goal from the beginning was to superimpose Nazism as not only a

governing system but as a religion for the civil and spiritual life of Germans. Hitler's plan was to expel Jews and dissolve Protestants and Catholics into a single state church.

Under Nazism Catholic political parties were outlawed, but the structure of the Catholic church was left to itself. Protestants had no unified head of the different denominations, so Hitler apparently in an attempt to co-opt them appointed a National Bishop to lead all Protestants. Only 10 percent of the Protestants agreed to follow this new bishop and called themselves the Nazified Protestant Church. Those completely enamoured by Hitler called themselves German Christians which synchronized historic Pagan religious practices with Christianity. Many Christians were alarmed at the Pagan overtones of Nazism and the Protestant women magazines spoke out against this. In 1934, 200 Protestant leaders began the Confessing Church which said the Nazis had no right to decide religious questions, but that they supported Hitler's domestic and foreign policies. Most wanted to remain spiritual Christians and secular Nazis but Hitler insisted on the primacy of his doctrine over the (too Jewish) Bible.

There were many large Protestant women's groups in Germany that yielded a great degree of power especially in social programs and education. They mistakenly thought that could maintain their influence while cooperating with the Nazi state. They discovered however, that the Nazis copied many of their social programs and slowly squeezed the women's groups out. Leaders in these groups were quietly replaced with Nazi women and quickly there was no independent voices heard. Hitler saw the state as supreme that demanded first loyalty. In general most of the Protestants approved of Hitler's seeming conservative policies to renew the family, restore prosperity, and to protect the country from what they saw as being the greatest danger - communism, but were suspicious of his power grabbing and paganism. Decades of financial depression and ruin (caused mostly by the League of Nation's harsh reparation demands after WWI) left them vulnerable to the siren call of a demented dictator.

The Catholic support for Hitler was less enthusiastic at first. Many Catholics had their own political party - The Catholic Center Party - that they voted for until Hitler made this party illegal. When Hitler made a Concordant with the Vatican, the Catholic leadership and bishops relaxed and supported Hitler. Hitler had agreed that Catholic had jurisdiction over religion and the Nazis over the state. However, the Catholics did not foresee how the state then decided that all of Catholic hospitals, schools, social service agencies, and community organization should be under their jurisdiction. Not only that, but the Nazis began interfering in reproductive issues. Priest who spoke against sterilization would be removed. Catholic marriage counseling centers were forbidden to discuss family law or eugenics. Very quickly the Nazis took over Catholic schools and hospitals.

As I read this book, I was astounded by how quickly Hitler ascended into power. He did not win the majority of votes in the National 1933 presidential election. Hindenburg won, but then reluctantly made Hitler Chancellor. However within a year, Hindenburg was dead and Hitler was in virtual control of everything. His secret meeting with German industrialists and bankers immediately after he became chancellor is seen as cementing his ambitions. In return for their generous contributions to the Nazi party, he probably promised them at least an end to labor unions and to eliminate communism and one can't help but wonder the possible take over of Jewish enterprises.

What strikes me most is how naive the churches, the business leaders, and the people were to Hitler's master plan. It is a reminder to me how diligent we must be to keep too much power from residing in the hand of one individual - in our case the presidency. It is also a reminder that some people in positions of power have no qualms about outright lying, manipulation, and using violence to achieve their ends. The one Christian group that stands out during Hitler reign is the Jehovah Witnesses. They refused to cooperate with Hitler in any way - from something as innocuous as saying Heil Hitler to joining the military. They refused to submit to state authority and in return their denomination was made illegal and many went to concentration camps. Historian Sybil Milton concludes that 'their courage and defiance in the face of torture and death punctures the myth of a monolithic Nazi state ruling over docile and submissive subjects,' (Wikipedia -Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Nazi Germany).

Lois Bujold says

Harrowing, as all such histories of the Nazi period in Germany are, but lucid. Almost 30 years ago, when it was first published, the writer might have been able to assume a closer knowledge in the reader with the history of which this gives an alternate angle of view, but I think there is enough background to bring most up to speed. I especially appreciated the chapter on the Weimar period, supplying a valuable background for a web of events that did not, after all, arise out of the blue.

Koonz groups women's experiences variously: Nazi, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, different classes and political views and social backgrounds. I read this in part just for that variety, thinking that it might help to try to better understand what all this looked like on the ground at the time -- and, therefore, what analogous events might look like in the here-and now, whether played out large or small. What are the danger signals, what is background noise? What were these people thinking? The book did, indeed, give me some of that.

Reading, I was thrown back in memory to the play *The People's Temple*, which was performed here in Minneapolis some years back, and which was one of the most brilliant plays I never want to see again. The dialogue consisted entirely and only of direct quotes from survivors and others who lived through the events, gradually and layer-by-layer building up a view of how and why the Jonestown massacre took place. This gave some of the same feel, of angle after intersecting angle combining to create a picture of that descent into horrors greater than the sum of its parts.

Highly recommended, assuming the reader does not already suffer from depression and/or insomnia.

Ta, L.

Sarah says

I was all set to give this book four stars, until I came across this sentence: "Sometimes, like Adam Goeth (portrayed vividly in Schindler's List by Thomas Keneally)...guards began to enjoy their work" (412). First of all, she's referring to *Amon*, not Adam, Goeth. Secondly, the book was called *Schindler's Ark*, not *Schindler's List* (apparently it was released in America as *Schindler's List*, so I'm a little more forgiving of that, but I still think it would have been more responsible to refer to it by its original title). Now, this isn't a big error, and it's not even really relevant to her argument. However, lazy little mistakes like this really bother me because they make me wonder how many other little mistakes are in the book that I didn't notice. So I took a star off, because now I'm questioning the book's credibility.

Other than that, it's pretty easy to read, it's interesting, and it's decently organized. I took off the other star because there were times when the chronology was a little unclear (especially because she organized it thematically rather than chronologically) and there were a few times when her point was a little confusing or convoluted. Generally, though, I enjoyed the book. I read it for a school paper, but I would have read it on my own eventually anyways, because I like the subject matter and it was quite readable.

Paulm says

This book is pretty good for background of the Third Reich but not much else. Most academic reviews are correct in that Koonz doesn't really break new ground and that she claims to focus on common women but the book only focuses on Middle class leaders. I don't know...I just don't get the significance really. Her evidence of women trying to establish autonomy within a male-dominated reform movement is pretty interesting though.

Miriam says

Koonz characterizes the Nazi regime as pronatal (in contrast* to Gisela Bock, who references her) but misogynistic. She argues that women played an active and significant part in bringing the Nazi regime to power, but seems to imply that these women were dupes, acting on behalf of their perceived maternal concerns (racism is lumped in). Sex and race were the predominant social markers in Nazi ideology.

*I kind of wondered reading Bock if she argued that the Nazis were anti-natal just to be able to say that she was arguing with previous scholars, because otherwise she's pretty much in agreement with Koonz.

Maryann says

This book took me quite a long time to read, even though it was fascinating. It's the sort of book I could only handle in small chunks, about 2-3 days per chapter. I learned a lot from this book, though.

Bobbo says

Controversial, I'll give it that, even though i disagree! Basically she argues that most of the women living in germany during WWII are guilty of the holocaust too because they kept up the trappings of a civilized society, despite the fact that they new atrocities were going on.

Camilla Tilly says

Claudia Koonz, it says on the inside cover, is a professor in Massachusetts. I guess she has something to prove to herself so she wrote a book with the help of a word book, trying her best at finding the most complicated and never-used words, to use in this book that contains 429 pages of bread text. Obviously she wanted to impress on someone but it certainly was not the ordinary reader that picks up this book thinking that she or he will find out why women chose to follow Hitler when there was nothing in it for them except humiliation.

I have a University degree in History and I have never read such a complicated and uninspiring book as this in all my studies. What she wanted to say does not take 429 pages to say.

Her research was no doubt thorough and she has documented everything in a proper way. But this book

really does not come to any conclusion at all since it lacks the little woman on the street, it lacks the human touch, it lacks the stories and testimonies of women that really lived during those days. And it was those women I thought I was going to meet in this book and not political women, the not-so-ordinary women, found in protocols, gestapo reports and who wrote their memoirs in latter years to declare themselves innocent.

In a most complicated manner she explains why German women were not ready to be emancipated after the war and receive the right to vote. In other countries, women had starved themselves for that right while the women in Germany were content with just being wives and mothers and thought that when these privileges were handed to them after WWI, on a platter, it meant the death of the family.

When the Nazis started to parade on the streets, they promised women that they could be what they wanted to be, wives and mothers. They promised that old values would come back, a turning back of the clock.

Once in power Hitler made sure that noone had any ideas of their own except his ideas and soon women found out that the lowest of man is far, far higher than the noblest of women. They were supposed to breed children only and then hand them over to the state to be indoctrinated. Men would fight for the country and women stand in factories making war materials. And marriage was not at all necessary to breed the children Hitler wanted. After 429 pages of reading it is still unclear why any woman of sound mind would go along with anything of the kind. But they did.
