

Inquiry Activity: Was Nazism anti-women?

Examine the documents below. Annotate and look for evidence that the Nazi's supported or opposed women's rights and liberty. Then consider the question above.

Evidence the Nazi's valued and supported women's rights and liberties

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Evidence the Nazi's DID NOT value and support women's rights and liberties

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Was Nazism anti-woman?



Document A: The New York Times

Time and again during the decade she spent researching the history of the forgotten women of the Third Reich, Claudia Koonz was struck by a paradox: the very women who were so protective of their children, so warm, nurturing and giving to their families, could at the same time display extraordinary cruelty. "These same women would close the door on their Jewish neighbors or serve as the leaders of the neighborhood Nazi spy system," said Dr. Koonz, an associate professor of history at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Mass.

This is only one of the many apparent contradictions addressed in Dr. Koonz's new book, "Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics" (St. Martin's Press, \$25). Her account explores the roles women played in the rise of Nazism - as followers, victims and resisters. When she began traveling to Germany to consult neglected archives scattered about the country, "very little research had been done on the history of women in Nazi Germany," said Dr. Koonz, who is 46 years old. Historians' primary focus had been on diplomacy and the actions of major players in the Nazi drama, most of them men.

Yet, though few women were part of the formal Nazi hierarchy, Dr. Koonz found that the role of many women in the Third Reich was neither insignificant nor innocent. "They were the ones who incrementally brought Nazism home," she said. "They indoctrinated their children in anti-Semitism. They were the ones who would tell their children to stop playing with the Jewish children down the block." "Of course," Dr. Koonz pointed out, "other German women displayed great bravery in resisting Nazi power." The experiences of Jewish women and others who opposed Nazism, detailed in several chapters, "give us great role models," she said.

Nevertheless, Dr. Koonz said, there was evidence to suggest that many women supported Hitler for some of the same reasons that the men did: the appeal to nationalism, order and stability in a nation undergoing the horrors of the Depression. "There was the fear of poverty among many middle-class women," Dr. Koonz said, "as well as the fear of Communism and Socialism."

The tragic paradox, Dr. Koonz said, was that the Nazi Party to which they turned was "misogynistic" - according to its ideology, women were inferior, separate and subordinate. Divorce, for example, was made easier for men than for women; judges permitted men to pay less alimony than before. Women also lost a degree of control over their lives. In the interest of the state, German women were exhorted to have more children; birth control was made illegal in 1933, and family-planning clinics were closed, Dr. Koonz said. Abortion, which had always been illegal, was prosecuted more zealously. But at the same time, "there was forced sterilization of women who were among what they called the 'subhuman' races," she said. "So, be they Aryans or non-Aryans, women's bodies didn't belong to them, but to their racial community."

In another paradox of the Third Reich, "there has never been a government that so thoroughly excluded women from power and yet organized them so vigorously," Dr. Koonz said. Women like Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, chief of the Women's Bureau, created vast bureaucracies, enlisting women in activities that fostered patriotism, education, culture, religion and health care.

Although the Nazi ideologues told women that they were to be supreme in the home, "ultimately, among the loyal Nazi families, the home was gutted," Dr. Koonz said. Men went off to war; children left home for Nazi schooling and Hitler youth activities. Eventually, women were forced to disband the home-economics curriculums created when they had been told Nazism was committed to the importance of traditional women's activities. Instead, teachers had to train women as stenographers and munitions workers to help the war effort.



Dr. Koonz's book also grapples with the moral issues raised by the specter of women, progenitors and nurturers, working to support a regime responsible for so much death. Does Dr. Koonz believe that women are morally or emotionally superior to men? "No," she said. "I suppose that will make a lot of people angry."

Another historian, Gerda Lerner, agreed. "Some women will find it very hard to take this bad news," she said in an interview. "Everyone knew about Ilse Koch," who was notorious for her excesses at Buchenwald. "But the happy illusion was that these were exceptional fanatics. Here we see even German feminists turning their feminism into anti-Semitism." "But no sex, and no group, has a premium on either good or evil," said Dr. Lerner, the Robinson-Edwards Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. An authority on women's history, Dr. Lerner was herself imprisoned by the Nazis in Austria; later, she managed to escape the country at the age of 19.

Dr. Lerner said Dr. Koonz may also face criticism for not focusing more on the experiences of Jewish women and on Germans' resistance to anti-Semitism. But Dr. Lerner had high praise for the book, adding, "I think women's history shows a lot of maturity when it can take on subjects like this."

Are there lessons for women today in the history of the Nazi experience? "Beware those who would create a segmented society," Dr. Koonz said. "And beware calls to revive so-called old-fashioned womanhood and subordination to men - appeals to crude, nostalgic 'familyism.'"

Do those who write history have faith that we are not condemned to repeat it? "Remember, the conditions were extreme," she said of Depression-era Germany. "You would need to re-create the conditions of economic collapse, political disarray and cultural confusion."

*Collins, Glenn. "Women in Nazi Germany: Paradoxes." The New York Times. Last modified March 2, 1987.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/02/style/women-in-nazi-germany-paradoxes.html>.*

Document B: Helen Stephens

I had read everything I could about Adolf Hitler and I had read his book. And I felt sure I was going to meet him. The Ouija Board said I would. [W]hen we were in Germany, why we had English speaking, they called them guides, assigned to each Olympic Team. For instance, the track team had several girls assigned to them through the duration of our stay. They were sort of "hostesses" for us. They would show us about. They could speak excellent English and through several of these girls who let their hair down, they were about our age, 18, 19, 20, and they began to tell us some of the terrible things that were happening over there. I had a friend from Poland who was going to school at the University of Berlin at that time too, and I went out there and met her. And she introduced me to an awful lot of people out there of course, teachers, professors, students, and I got the distinct impression that it was not only the Jews who were being discriminated against in Germany at that time, but women in general, in the sense that Hitler did not see any reason for women to receive any higher education and that their greatest service to the fatherland was to have babies and more babies.

...He didn't care where they were, except to produce babies. And as I understood it from these girls, any German officer, I don't know whether that included soldiers or not, but any German officer had the right and the privilege upon seeing any German girl that he took a fancy to - to invite her to his quarters and to get her pregnant - and that was a high honor for the girl and she would receive a medal and 500 dollars. Well, these girls... They were terrified.

... Well, after I had won my 100 meter race, I guess it was maybe 10 minutes after, I was still perspiring heavily. A German messenger came up, and I was standing there with Dee Boeckmann and he asked if, in English, if I would accompany him up to Hitler's box that the Fuhrer wanted to meet me. And I had previously made plans to up and speak over CBS radio back to America and Dee and I were in the process of getting up there. We were just getting ready to leave and she spoke up and told him that, you



know, we couldn't do it at this time, but after the broadcast we'd be available. He said, "I can't go back and tell the Fuhrer that you won't come. He'll shoot me." And we said, "Ah, he won't shoot you, there are too many people around." So he went back, reluctantly looking over his shoulder. But when we came out of that broadcast up at the top of the stadium, he was there to take us down, and Dee went with me. We were ushered into a room behind Hitler's box and it was a long room and we hadn't been there but a few seconds and the door swung open at the other end and about 20 Black Shirt guards came in and arrayed themselves around this room and pulled their German Lugers, loosened their holster, to see if their gun would come out easily, and they all stood stiff at attention and we looked at each other and wondered, "What is going on here?" Then Hitler came in... He was accompanied by his interpreter and strode forward and gave me a sloppy Nazi salute and I didn't return it and I gave him my 'ole "Missouri" handshake I always say. And he immediately came up and began to pinch me and squeeze me and pinch my fanny and all that stuff. I was kind of shocked, you know, the leader doing that.

...And he was asking me what I thought of Germany and what I thought of the Olympics and so forth. I was giving him affirmative answers and, I asked him if he would give me his autograph. He started to write it, then a flash bulb went off and he jumped about three feet up, straight up in the air and began to spout German and it was a little photographer, a fellow about five feet tall, a little guy and he began to kick him and he had these gloves draped over, his kid gloves draped over his arm, and he took those off and hit him across the face (MAKES SLAPPING NOISES ABOUT FIVE TIMES) and he motioned to those guards to come and get him - you know sick him and three or four of them came forward and one of them grabbed the guy's camera and he picked it up and bashed it on the floor and glass flew, you know the lens I guess breaking.

... And then they began to kick that around in there like soccer, (MAKES FAST SLAPPING SOUNDS FIVE TIMES) you know, in that room, kicking that thing all over the place. And these four guys grabbed this little guy and carried him - his arms and legs stretched out - to the door and then they went, "One, two, three," and threw him out against the hall and he scooted right down the hall and then they kicked his camera out after him. Then Hitler just returned and said, "How would you like to spend a weekend with me in Berchtesgaden?" Dee spoke up right away and said, "She's in training. She's got a track meet here." ... and after a few more squeezes and he said, "I was a pure Aryan type and I should have been running for Germany. I should be a German." Then he shook hands and he left.

Stephens, Helen. "Helen Stephens Oral History." Kaplan Feldman Holocaust Museum. Last modified September 29, 1984. <https://stlholocaustmuseum.org/oral-history/helen-stephens/>.

Document C: Women in the Third Reich

Women were central to Adolf Hitler's plan to create an ideal "Aryan" Community (Volksgemeinschaft). Praising German women as "our most loyal, fanatical fellow-combatants," Hitler valued women for both their activism in the Nazi movement and their biological power as generators of the race. In Nazi thinking, a larger, racially purer population would enhance Germany's military strength and provide settlers to colonize conquered territory in eastern Europe. The Third Reich's aggressive population policy encouraged "racially pure" women to bear as many children as possible.

Nazi population policy took a radical turn in 1936 when SS leaders created the state-directed program known as Lebensborn (Fount of Life). In an extension of the SS Marriage Order of 1932, the 1936 Lebensborn ordinance prescribed that every SS member should father four children, in or out of wedlock. Lebensborn homes sheltered single mothers with their children, provided birth documents and financial support, and recruited adoptive parents for the children.

In the end, however, the Lebensborn program was never promoted aggressively. Instead, Nazi population policy concentrated on the family and marriage. The state encouraged matrimony through marriage loans, dispensed family income supplements for each new child, publicly honored "child-rich" families, bestowed the Cross of Honor of the German Mother on women bearing four or more babies, and increased punishments for abortion.

Wives, Mothers, and Workers



The National Socialist Women's Union and German Women's Agency used Nazi propaganda to encourage women to focus on their roles as wives and mothers. Besides increasing the population, the regime also sought to enhance its "racial purity" through "species upgrading," notably by promulgating laws prohibiting marriage between "Aryans" and "non-Aryans" while preventing those with handicaps and certain diseases from marrying at all.

Girls were taught to embrace the role of mother and obedient wife in school and through compulsory membership in the Nazi League of German Girls (Bund Deutscher Mädel; BDM), which started at the age of ten years old. However, rearmament followed by total war obliged the Nazis to abandon the domestic ideal for women. The need for labor prompted the state to prod women into the workforce (for example, through the Duty Year, the compulsory-service plan for all women) and even into the military itself (the number of female auxiliaries in the German armed forces approached 500,000 by 1945).

The Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls were the primary tools that the Nazis used to shape the beliefs, thinking and actions of German youth.

Women in the War

Gearing up for the war and waging it obliged Nazi leaders to mobilize female workers. Young women provided free labor in annual summer camps, and in 1939 all single women had to report for compulsory labor service in war-related industries. By war's end, the number of female auxiliaries in the German armed forces approached 500,000, including some 3,700 women who served as guards in the Nazi camp system.

Equally numerous to the female auxiliaries were the many women who were secretaries in the Nazi machinery of destruction, supportive wives of SS officers, and nurses in the Euthanasia Program.

An incalculable but significant number of women were accomplices and perpetrators of the Holocaust as plunderers, organizers of the deportations and the mass shootings. Some went so far as to commit murder. After the war, the majority remained silent about the crimes that they committed and witnessed.

Opponents of the Reich

Aside from the many women who aided in implementing Nazi policies and driving the war effort were those who actively opposed the regime or were persecuted by the party for being outside the boundaries of what was socially acceptable. Included were women considered to be political opponents for their association with communism who were then sent to camps in the early period of the political purges and the women who led active resistance efforts, such as Sophie Scholl of die Weiße Rose (the White Rose).

Also sent to the camps were women considered "asocials" for behavior deemed inappropriate to a woman's role or those who were murdered in the T-4 ("Euthanasia") program. Others persecuted by the Reich included thousands of women who were punished for attempting an abortion.

"Women in the Third Reich." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC. Last modified December 2, 2020. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/women-in-the-third-reich>.

