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Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies. German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*

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Hitler's Furies. German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields is a pioneering study of the 500,000 young German and Austrian women who went to the eastern front during World War II, tasked with helping to carry out the Third Reich's imperial mission. The Nazi conquest of Eastern Europe, notes Wendy Lower, an American historian of the Holocaust, required the mobilization of all Germans. Men and women alike were called upon to participate in all campaigns, from the reproduction of the Aryan nation to the shunning of inferior races, from the colonization of the eastern front to the genocide of Europe's Jews. (6) *The systems that make mass murder possible do not work without the broad participation of society*, argues Lower, *and yet nearly all histories of the Holocaust leave out half of those who populated that society, as if women's history happens somewhere else*. (14) This pervasive gender-blindness, Lower concludes, accounts for how German women, in their overlooked roles as accomplices and perpetrators, "got away with murder."

Lower, a Claremont McKenna College professor of the Holocaust and genocides, conceived of the book during a 1992 research trip to Ukraine to access newly opened Soviet archives containing German records of the Nazi occupation of the East. In Zhitomir, once Heinrich Himmler's headquarters, she came across German reports listing thousands of women who had relocated to the eastern front, starting in 1941, to support colonization of the territories for Aryan settlement. She makes ample and primary use of postwar investigations and trials to probe the lives of 13 representative women and examine why so many did what they did; to what extent they were aware of the moral and legal consequences of their actions; and why the criminal justice system overlooked women during the lengthy era of postwar tribunals.

COMING OF AGE IN THE THIRD REICH

During 1941-44, ambitious young women who had internalized the Third Reich's racist ideology headed east seeking careers, paychecks, independence, romance and adventure. Leaving behind repressive laws, middle class mores, and social traditions that were regimented and oppressive, they found *possibilities for advancement in the emerging Nazi empire abroad*. (9) They worked in offices, among the occupational elite, and in the killing fields of Eastern Europe, where the worst atrocities were carried out. (9) Trained as nurses, teachers, secretaries and concentration camp guards, thousands of women witnessed mass murders; many others were accomplices to Judeocide, while some also perpetrated atrocities. The sheer number of women who relocated to the eastern front – nurses, teachers, secretaries, wives and lovers – establishes their importance in genocidal warfare and imperial rule. The German Red Cross trained 640,000 women, of whom 400,000 were placed in wartime service, mostly sent to battle zones in the east. Of the 500,000 women trained in support positions such as radio operators, file card keepers, flight recorders and wire tappers, around 200,000 served on the eastern front. (6)

Some 30,000 women were certified by Himmler's SS, directly involved in the planning and execution of the Holocaust. Lower describes the secretaries of Odilo Globocnik, the SS officer in Lublin responsible for the murder of Warsaw's Jews, who *cheerfully prepared lists of Jewish deportees to Treblinka, lists of Jews who died, and lists of confiscated property*. Secretaries worked in offices responsible for sending Jews to ghettos and massacres; they took dictation and typed orders for resettlement of children and for deportations and mass murders; they attended mass shootings. Secretaries were desk murderers who "contributed to the normalization of the perverse" while insisting they were merely conducting their assigned duties. Consoling SS wives and lovers set up refreshment tables near execution and deportation sites to replenish their men after a day's lethal work. (7)

When they admired themselves in their new Red Cross uniforms or proudly displayed their certificates for completing a childcare course sponsored by the Nazi Party, or celebrated their new typing job in a Gestapo office, they became a part of the Nazi regime, whether intentionally or not. It is perhaps not surprising that these young women did not admit to themselves or to us, either then or many years later, in courtrooms or their own memoirs, what their participation in the Nazi regime had actually entailed. (10)

Those who killed, the perpetrators, are a group unto themselves. Their numbers are hard to calculate because most were never accused, exposed or put on trial. Still, says Lower, *their deeds are as grotesque as any that have been gathered into the history of the Holocaust*. A woman named Johanna Altvater had no official mission to murder, but she willingly did so on her own initiative. A mother of two children, she was particularly prone to killing Jewish children. Liesel Willhaus would shoot Jews from the balcony of her home, to the applause of her young daughter. A woman named Erna Petri, put on trial in East Germany, confessed to killing six Jewish children between the ages

of six and twelve. She was found guilty and imprisoned. However, after German reunification, she negotiated her release, possibly with the help of *Stille Hilfe* (Silent Aid), a postwar SS organization in Germany. She moved to a Bavarian village *where she enjoyed the Alpine mountains and lakes with Gudrun Burwitz, the daughter of Heinrich Himmler and a prominent member of Silent Aid*. The entire village attended her funeral.

NOT JUST IMITATING MEN

These women were not sociopaths, argues Lower, but ordinary women who did not exhibit violent tendencies either before or after the war. How do we make sense of their horrendous participation in the Nazi genocide? *Hitler's Furies* contributes to the existing body of research on the roles performed by "ordinary people" in carrying out the Nazi genocide. Most notable is the 1992 study by American historian Christopher Browning, entitled *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. Browning spotlighted the ordinary German men who were psychologically transformed into mass murderers. Shifting the focus from the Nazi high command to the actual killers, ordinary men who had been asked, not forced, to kill, Browning's was the first work to present the tens of thousands of conscripted soldiers and policemen from all walks of life, including many middle-aged men, who rounded up millions of Jews and methodically shot them in forests, fields and ditches, or crammed them into cattle cars under heavy guard en route to the gas chambers. Browning also made use of tribunal reports archived in the postwar German State Administration of Justice, which investigated Nazi crimes against humanity. *Never before, he wrote, had I seen the monstrous deeds of the Holocaust so starkly juxtaposed with the human faces of the killers*. Lower adopts two of Browning's questions in her examination of women's motivations to participate in genocide: What drove them to kill? Were they programmed for murder?

According to Lower, *The varied experiences of German men and women in the eastern occupied territories as they became direct witnesses, accomplices and perpetrators of the Holocaust broadened and deepened their anti-Semitic behavior. Anti-Semitism there took on many forms, more elaborate and extreme than in the Reich, where sustained, visible violence was not tolerated and the 'Bolshevik' threat was not directly encountered. Judeo-Bolshevism was... a powerful mobilizing ideology of the war. Yet most women who went east were not rabid anti-Semites; in fact most identified with other convictions and ambitions. The eastern experience proved transformative. It was in the eastern territories that Nazi anti-Semitism found its fullest expression and most profound development, and for some the anti-Semitic ideas absorbed there were not discredited by the defeat of Hitler's Germany.* (163)

Nurses assisted in atrocious medical experiments, administered lethal injections to the so-called racially impure including the disabled, and recorded their treatments whose alleged purpose was to end the patients' suffering. *Nurses and doctors rationalized their lethal injections as ending suffering; the "patients" were unhealthy, incurable... [Jews] were anathema to the German fantasy of a utopian Lebensraum. In the perpetrator's mind,*

Germans and Jews could not co-exist. Female killers, like their male counterparts, developed this conviction after years of conditioning in the Reich, absorbed it from a general climate of popular and state-condoned anti-Semitism in Germany and across Europe. (162)

German perpetrators, male and female, exhibited similar psychologies of denial and repression. *Those confronted with their misdeeds replied along standard lines denying knowledge and memory or simply obeying orders.* (154) Lower claims *there were plenty of women who killed Jews and other enemies, more than had been documented during or after war.* While she did not find many documented cases of direct killing by women, and the women who went on trial mostly denied their culpability, Lower insists that their acts of violence were neither anomalies nor marginal.

Hitler's Furies belongs to a growing gender scholarship about the nature of German women's cruelty in World War II and its historical perception. Religious studies scholar, Susannah Heschel has written that women's cruelty is typically *presented with a sense of surprise, transgressing gender expectations, whereas men's cruelty is discussed without reference to their gender, as though the connection between atrocity and maleness is self-evident.*¹ Heschel introduces the notion that female perpetrators were not just "male imitators," an idea that Lower develops. Given the gender roles promoted in the Third Reich, women who worked at a concentration camp, administered lethal injections, or participated in impulsive shootings expressed *aspects of the peculiar femininity endorsed by the Nazi regime. Women's willingness to take part in atrocities, particularly against Jewish inmates, which was understood as a protection of Nazi Aryan society, might signify a maternal devotion to children, morally intensified by their violence.* (2)

Lower's portrayal suggests that the women she profiles were not emulating men, though some female perpetrators acknowledged they sought male validation. Others were swept up in the reckless, unfettered, intoxicating Wild East. Although Lower does not directly or comprehensively draw upon the gender research that predates her work, such as Gudrun Schwarz's study of violent SS wives and Elizabeth Harvey's focus on teachers in Poland who looted Jewish possessions,² she does briefly mention some of their contributions as having pioneered research on women's participation in the Holocaust, but says they did not delve into women's deeper responsibility in the Holocaust. Prior to her own research, she asserts, the scope of women's participation in the eastern massacres remained ambiguous, the possibility of female culpability had been neglected and under-examined. (3-4) She insists that a serious consideration of women's diverse roles in the Third Reich was a "historical blind spot" but does not argue her position or address how this might have been so given that the subject is hardly new in academia or the media.³

¹ S. Heschel, 'Does Atrocity Have a Gender? Feminist Interpretations of Women in the SS' in J.M. Diefendorf (ed.), *New Currents in Holocaust Research*, Evanston 2004, *Lessons and Legacies*, Vol. 6.

² G. Schwarz, *Die Frau an seiner Seite. Die Ehefrauen in der 'SS- Sippongemeinschaft'*, Hamburg 1997; E. Harvey, *Women and the Nazi East. Agents and Witnesses of Germanization*, New Haven 2003.

³ Lower's work joins a sizeable body of gender research on German women and the Holocaust: A.T. Allen, *Women in Twentieth-Century Europe*, Houndmills 2008, *Gender and History* (Palgrave Macmillan (Firm)); R. Bridenthal, A. Grossmann, M. Kaplan (eds.), *When Biology Became Destiny*.

EXPLOITING A GENDER STEREOTYPE

What became of the guilty after the war? Many former Nazis and wartime criminals slipped comfortably back into civilian life. While this is broadly known, *Hitler's Furies* provides a cynical twist. When faced with the possibility of a criminal conviction, female perpetrators presented themselves as apolitical women, far from the machinery of killing, incapable of crime because they were women and mothers. In postwar Germany, Lower writes, *the male judiciary remained skeptical of the testimony of Jews, especially of statements that described atrocious female behavior*. It was difficult to locate the accused women, most of whom had returned to Germany or Austria, got married, changed their surnames, and could not be traced by their maiden names. The evidence of their crimes was often hazy, unsubstantiated or too difficult to locate. Witnesses could not be found or they refused to testify or they had died during the 30+ years that the trials were taking place. Moreover, Stalin's rearrangement of Eastern Europe *accomplished what Hitler's henchmen had desired: a displacement of local memory*, writes Lower.

In many cases, Holocaust survivors were able to testify against women who had committed horrendous crimes, and either the women were brought to trial or their accusers were not believed. If incarcerated, the women were released, often early. Johanna Altvater—the woman who undertook to murder Jews on her own—was tried and acquitted twice. She worked, after the war, in a child welfare office.

After the war came shocking breaches of justice. An estimated 20,000 German women were deported to the USSR where, guilty or not, they were punished. Women who had remained or returned to Germany, whether or not they had served in the war, were raped by Soviet Red Army soldiers. Allied tribunals in West Germany were impatient to complete the court trials and start the procedures to de-nazify the German population. Their patriarchal biases enabled female perpetrators to go free. The record of justice is disturbingly poor, notes Lower. *Most women who participated in the Holocaust quietly resumed normal lives*.

As long as German women are consigned to another sphere or their political influence is minimized, half the population of a genocidal society, in historian Ann Taylor Allen's words, is *endowed with the innocence of the crimes of the modern state* and placed *outside of history itself*. (11) *Hitler's Furies* is Wendy Lower's attempt to reinsert women's political agency into the historical record of Nazi Germany to be duly accounted, for better or for worse.

Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany, New York 1984, *New Feminist Library*; C. Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland. Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics*, New York 1987; J. Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*, London 2001. More specific studies include A. Owings, *Frauen. German Women Recall the Third Reich*, New Brunswick 1993; H. Jetter, *Women of the Swastika*, Evanston 1963; A.M. Sigmund, *Women of the Third Reich*, Richmond Hill 2000. Irish television recently broadcast a meeting between a Jewish concentration camp survivor and a female SS guard, who insists she fed hot chocolate to prisoners: <<http://www.irishcentral.com/roots/history/Irish-documentary-exposes-93-year-old-woman-as-a-Holocaust-suspect.html>>; <<http://www.welt.de/regionales/hamburg/article136969161/Ich-habe-nichts-gemacht-ich-war-nur-in-der-Kueche.html>> 20 February 2016.

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