

Builders of a Nation: Women's Experiences in Postwar Germany

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The German women who survived the Second World War are often characterized by the familiar images of long lines of women digging the country out from underneath the rubble. However, their contributions to the rebuilding of Germany reach much further than the act of physically rebuilding the country. The sacrifices required of them for the survival their families and themselves were tremendous. They had the responsibility of keeping what remained of their families together during the war and then shouldered the task of keeping them alive in its aftermath. Germany was left decimated on many levels and while the nation tried to rebuild itself and begin to come to terms with the devastation caused by the war, its people were left to try moving forward with their lives. Women were at the forefront of this attempt to reestablish a sense of normalcy in the lives of their families. As they struggled to do this, they faced many challenges resulting from the consequences of the war. The war on the battlefield ended long before the war at home ended for women. The challenges they faced culminated in their realization that they too have made important contributions to their country and that the myth of "man" is just that, a myth. As a result, the idea of what women's roles meant for society changed. Their sacrifices gained them social and political acknowledgement. By the 1950's German politicians were attempting to transform important women's issues into ones that affected the larger German society. Women's experiences during the reconstruction period in Germany led to a change in

their perceptions of the family and the role of men and women in family.

A Woman in Berlin, written by an anonymous young journalist in Berlin in the spring of 1945, is a record of one woman's experiences with some of the common challenges facing women at the end of the war.¹ First published in German at the end of the 50's, the book was not well received because the journalist chose to address the rapes that occurred in 1945 in Berlin. This was a topic that had quickly become taboo in Germany. At the author's request the journal was not published again until after her death in 2001. Although the intended audience of the journalist is unknown, she has written a valuable historical record describing life in Germany in 1945. She describes problems that women faced such as, housing shortages, widespread hunger, conflict in relationships and violence against women. These problems remained a part of the lives of women throughout the 40's. The journalist's writing reflects a change in how women viewed their male counterparts and themselves.

Under Nazi rule German women lived under the *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* ideal, which encouraged them to stay out of the workforce in order to care for their family. They were expected to remain housewives, produce babies and care for their husbands and children. Goebbels described the role of women to be "...beautiful and to bring children

¹ Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin*, trans. Philip Boehm (New York: Picador, 2005).

into the world.”² A good German woman was a mother of many; to emphasize the importance of this role Hitler awarded the Mother’s Cross to those women who fulfilled their duty honorably. However, as the war continued and more men left to fight, and as the economy worsened, women were forced to take over those roles deemed by the Nazi party as belonging to men, such as working and providing for the family. By the end of the war the shortage of men meant that women would have to continue caring for and providing for their families alone. Amidst the destroyed buildings and broken streets, women did everything they could to survive. According to historian Elizabeth Heineman, this was the time when women truly learned what they were capable of doing. They had already learned that they could work both outside and inside the home, but when forced to survive air raids and the constant need to move their families around to keep them safe, they truly discovered their strength.³

In postwar Germany poverty was a major concern for women as they struggled to find adequate housing for their families. Housing was difficult to find because of the destruction prevalent in so many cities. A report written by President Herbert Hoover stated that approximately 25% of the housing in cities in the combined British and American zones had been destroyed, leaving people to live in the rubble.⁴ The city of Hamburg, for

example, lost 55-60% of its buildings during bombings in 1943. At the end of the war, it is estimated that as many as 14 million people were homeless.⁵ Rebuilding started soon after the war ended but because of the large amount of damage to cities, it took many months to complete. Women and children found themselves living in partially destroyed buildings because they had nowhere else to go. Klara Steiner, a woman living in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin with her children, moved back into their apartment at the end of the war but found it so badly damaged that they were only able to live in the kitchen.⁶

The shortage of adequate housing made it necessary for many families to share living space with other people, like the young journalist. Her experience mirrors reality for many women during this time. After bombs destroyed the part of the building containing her apartment, the journalist moved in with a neighbor and her friend. This situation only worked as long as her relationship with a Russian officer provided them with enough food to survive. Once the officer left, she was forced to move out. It was not uncommon to find multiple families living together in an apartment or house that may have housed a single family before the war. They lived in spaces too small to house the number of people in their families. Children were often restricted in their play. The meaning of private property changed as people fought to use anything they could find

² As reported in Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 56.

³ Elizabeth Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, LTD, 1999), 80.

⁴ Herbert Hoover, *The President’s Economic Mission to Germany and Austria: Report No 1*

German Agriculture and Food Requirements (Washington, DC: GPO, 1947) 3.

⁵ Elizabeth Heineman, “The Hour of the Woman: Memories of Germany’s “Crisis Years” and West German National Identity,” *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 2 (1996): 362.

⁶ As reported to Meyer and Schulze, *Wie Wir das Alles Geschafft Haben*, 23.

to survive. This type of living situation did not ease the burdens of women; it only made life more difficult for them.

Food shortages, problematic during the war, continued to affect women and children after the war. Restrictions may have started as early as late August 1937, although German citizens fared better than people in nations that Hitler's armies occupied. However, once the war ended, the exploitation of these occupied countries also ended and in Germany hunger became an ever-present problem facing everyone.⁷ The journalist wrote as she was suffering from hunger, "[a]ll thinking and feeling, all wishes and hopes begin with food."⁸ Other women describe how they went without food so that their children would have more to eat.⁹ In the West German occupied zones, the rationing system utilized by Hitler during the end of the war was kept in place. The population was divided into different groups based on differences in employment and family situation. Each group was then assigned a specific amount of calories they were able to receive. Housewives were placed in the category that received the least amount of food rations, while nursing mothers were placed in a slightly elevated category that provided slightly more provisions, like fat. However, under the ration system, people were still forced to live with very little food: "Berlin housewives could claim a daily ration of 11 ounces of bread, 14 ounces of potatoes, 1 ounce of grain, 2/3 ounce of meat, and 1/4 ounce of fat."¹⁰ According to historian Manfred Enssle,

calorie intake never went higher than 1,500 calories per day.¹¹

Hoover's report on the living conditions of Germans states that the lack of food caused cases of starvation in children and women.¹² Despite the lack of food, women managed to support their families. They did everything they could to secure food, including bartering, buying on the black market, and traveling to the countryside where they could purchase food from farmers. *A Woman in Berlin* documents how, after a horse was seriously wounded, people desperate for meat, "sliced and dug at the first spot they found."¹³ Furthermore, programs such as CARE were established by other countries, specifically to aid the survivors of the war by alleviating some of the massive hunger among people.¹⁴ These types of programs, along with the black market, were vital for survival.

Along with meeting the basic needs of their families, women also had to fear for their own safety and that of their female family members and friends. Occupying Soviet forces posed a large threat to German women and girls in the eastern part of the country. As soldiers entered cities, women reported horrifying experiences of rape, many were raped multiple times. According to historian Atina Grossmann, after the war roughly 60% of the inhabitants of Berlin were women. Her research indicates that the number of rapes in Berlin could have been as high as one out of every three of the one and a half

⁷ Enssle, "The Harsh Discipline of Food Scarcity in Postwar Stuttgart," 482.

⁸ Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin*, 3.

⁹ Reported to Meyer and Schulze, *Wie Wir das Alles Geschafft Haben*, 54.

¹⁰ Heineman, "The Hour of the Woman, 374.

¹¹ Enssle, "The Harsh Discipline of Food Scarcity in Postwar Stuttgart," 488.

¹² Hoover, *The President's Economic Mission to Germany and Austria*, 7-9.

¹³ Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin*, 164.

¹⁴ CARE organization website <http://www.care.org/about/history.asp>.

million women in the city.¹⁵ Rape is the major theme in *A Woman in Berlin*. The author kept records on scraps of paper, documenting her own encounters with Russian soldiers during 1945. She describes how when she grew tired physically and emotionally from being repeatedly attacked, she realized that agreeing to sleep with one officer as often as he wanted could offer her protection from other men. This tactic was utilized by other women and helped to save them from further violence. There are many reports of women hiding neighbors, daughters, and others in crawl spaces and tiny attics to save them from the Soviet soldiers. Some women write that, if a small child was present, a woman would be left alone. Others, like a woman with whom Grossmann talked, described how she tried to save her young 10-year-old daughter from the soldiers by offering herself in place of the girl. Sacrificing herself was the only option she could think of to save her child. Another mother talks about how her fear for the safety of her child, who slept in the same room, allowed her to survive repeated attacks.¹⁶

Rape also brought the inevitable concern of becoming pregnant into the forefront of women's minds. The journalist said while talking about this topic with another woman, "I'm simply convinced it couldn't happen to me. As if I could lock myself up-physically shut myself off from something so unwanted."¹⁷ Women had few choices if they became pregnant, have the child or try to get an abortion. In 1928

abortion laws in Weimar Germany had been amended to include what is known as Paragraph 218, which in simple terms banned abortions except in cases where it was suggested for medical reasons.¹⁸ The purpose behind this law was to encourage population growth. This became a prioritized goal for the Weimar government and the focus of many public relations campaigns. Later, under the Nazis, abortion laws were tightened even more, making it absolutely illegal to perform abortions on Aryan women. Anyone not in compliance with this law faced serious repercussions. According to one woman, this could include being sent to a concentration camp.¹⁹

The exceedingly large number of women who had been raped in the months following the war forced political leaders to confront abortion laws in order to protect women. Paragraph 218 was suspended in 1945, allowing women who were raped and were pregnant as a result of the attacks to have an abortion. Many women recounted what happened to them to authorities and were able to have an abortion, no matter how far along their pregnancy was.²⁰ The issue of abortion rights is an example of how women were able to advocate for themselves after the war. Grossmann writes that "[w]omen matter-of-factly and pragmatically asserted their right to terminate pregnancies that were not socially, economically, or physically viable-in the name of saving the family or preventing the birth of an unwanted

¹⁵ Atina Grossmann, "Trauma, Memory, and Motherhood: Germans and Jewish Displaced Persons in Post-Nazi Germany, 1945, *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 38 (1998): 217, 220.

¹⁶ Grossmann, "Trauma, Memory, and Motherhood," 222.

¹⁷ Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin*, 73.

¹⁸ Atina Grossmann, *Reforming Sex* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 8.

¹⁹ Alison Owings, *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007) 345.

²⁰ Grossmann, "Trauma, Memory, and Motherhood," 221.

or unfit child.”²¹ Abortions were only legal, however, for victims of rape, and after 1946 the laws banning them were reestablished. Even though the law was suspended for a short time and was then reinstated, a continued conversation and debate over abortion and women’s rights continued in both East and West Germany. Although this created a great deal of controversy within the country, it also created a climate in which women were able to push women’s rights.

These traumatic experiences became part of the collective memory of the women who lived them. Experiencing rape forced women to confront issues they had not previously dealt with publically and brought them together to deal with the attacks. The journalist wrote, “this mass rape is something we are overcoming collectively as well. All the women help each other by speaking about it, airing their pain, and allowing others to air theirs and spit out what they’ve suffered.”²² Healing came in part because these women were able to work through their experiences together and because they understood what it meant to survive the attacks. However, women received little support from men, who were themselves devastated by these attacks on wives and daughters. Men did not always know or want to know how to help women who survived rape. Having either heard about what Soviet soldiers were doing from other people or from their female family members, the topic of rape became taboo when men returned home and remained taboo until the 60’s. Other men witnessed the raping of wives and daughters with their own eyes as soldiers entered homes, bunkers and other buildings.

²¹ Grossmann, *Reforming Sex*, 194.

²² Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin*, 147

Gerd, the boyfriend of the journalist, upon learning that she had been raped, became angry and said to her, “You’ve all turned into a bunch of shameless bitches, every one of you in the building...[i]t’s horrible being around you. You’ve lost all sense of measure.”²³ His reaction to these traumatic experiences is representative of the reactions of some of the men related to women who were raped.

The stress created by the fact that not all men were able or willing to fully readjust to life after the war, produced a rift in relationships between men and women. When men did return home, they were often sick or injured. They did not always understand the sacrifices their families had made to survive. They came home and found strong willed women who had become very skilled in surviving with very little. Heineman writes, “Men’s disappointment in their inability to make themselves indispensable expressed itself in sullenness and irritability, adding to wives’ emotional work.”²⁴ Men struggled to find their place in their families and in society when they returned home from fighting. Also because they had not been at home during the war, men did not know how to function in the changed society, which caused women to alter how they viewed them.²⁵ Men were, in some regards, helpless and very much dependent on their wives.

Women’s experiences after the war changed their perspective of men. The journalist describes seeing German soldiers coming back from the Russian front and realizing that she viewed men very differently than she had before the

²³ Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin*, 259.

²⁴ Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make?*, 122.

²⁵ Heineman, 122-123.

war; she was not alone in how she felt. In her own words, she describes the change that began to take place in women as they realized that the world run by men, the world in which they had been living, was coming to an end:

We feel sorry for them; they seem so miserable and powerless. The weaker sex. Deep down we women are experiencing a kind of collective disappointment. The Nazi world-ruled by men, glorifying the strong man- is beginning to crumble, and with it the myth of 'Man.' In earlier wars men could claim that the privilege of killing and being killed for the fatherland was theirs and theirs alone. Today we women, too, have a share. That has transformed us, emboldened us. Among the many defeats at the end of this war is the defeat of the male sex.²⁶

Women no longer saw the country as belonging to the men; it also belonged to women. This new knowledge empowered them and gave them a sense of pride. Hitler's belief that women had no place in politics and in society other than to produce children and care for husbands was shattered. The same author writes about the problem of being an intelligent woman in Germany and having to downplay her own intelligence when she was around German men, who "always want[ed] to be smarter, always want[ed] to be in a position to teach his little woman."²⁷ As the war ended, this changed for women like Anne-Marie Fabian a divorced woman, who wanted nothing more than the chance to study. After the war she was finally able to

attend college at the age of thirty, despite working long days and having a child to care for at the same time.²⁸ She was set on succeeding in her pursuit of education. Women like Anne-Marie emerged from the ashes strong and determined to live. Women's sense of empowerment and the change in how they perceived their own place in society exemplify ways in which the war changed how they viewed themselves.

The difference in women's perceptions of the importance of marriage between the beginning and the end of the war was another effect of the war. As divorce rates rose, the number of young women remaining single increased, challenging the institution of marriage. It was women who were questioning marriage in ways they had not done previously. Before the war it was much more common for a man to ask for a divorce than a woman. After the war women began seeking divorce more often than they previously had.²⁹ Sociologists Meyer and Schulze report that in Berlin, for example, divorces rose from 12,644 in 1939 to 15,363 in 1948.³⁰ They report that West German divorces reached a high of 84,780 in 1950.³¹ After the war women hoped their husbands would come home and help them provide for the family. When their husbands came home, they were often unable or unwilling to help, adding a great deal of strain to already struggling

²⁸Inge Stolten, *Der Hunger Nach Erfahrung: Frauen nach 1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, 1983), 53-54.

²⁹ Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make?*, 123.

³⁰ Sibylle Meyer and Eva Schulze, *Wie Wir das Alles Geschafft Haben*, (München: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1984), 221.

³¹ As found in Giesela Helweg and Hildegard Maria Nickel, *Frauen in Deutschland 1945-1992*, (Berlin: Akademie Verlag GmbH, 1993), 171.

²⁶ Anonymous, 42-43.

²⁷ Anonymous, 118.

marriages. For example, Charlotte Wagner, who lived in Berlin, experienced problems in her marriage when her husband returned from the war physically and mentally exhausted. He came back from battle in 1946, at the same time his wife and son were living with her mother. Charlotte recalls that her husband refused to do even those tasks normally seen as men's work, while she worked outside the home, cared for him and the baby, and completed all of the housework. They eventually divorced because of the tension that developed between them.³² Men's inability to function in the world made them an added burden for women to carry and added tension to already strained marriages. Many marriages did not survive these conditions.

An increase in social and political recognition and awareness of women's sacrifices during the period of reconstruction is an important development in the 50's. As life returned to normal, an increasing number of women began reporting health problems relating directly to the difficult circumstances they had faced. A pamphlet published in the early 50's by convalescent homes for women stated: "The results of two wars, unemployment, inflation, the loss of home required almost inhuman capabilities from women."³³ These inhuman capabilities left their mark on many women. Carpenter believes that "women who sacrificed their own welfare to feed, clothe, and house their children as well as to care for husbands who had returned home disabled" encountered conditions that, "proved so

³² As reported to Meyer and Schulze, *Wie Wir das Alles Geschafft Haben*, 52-53.

³³ K.M.N. Carpenter "'For Mothers Only': Mother's Convalescent Homes and Modernizing Maternal Ideology in 1950's West Germany". *Journal of Social History*: 2001, 869.

debilitating that countless women suffered from illnesses ranging from insomnia to malnutrition."³⁴ Else Heuss-Knapp, wife of the first president of the Federal Republic of Germany, announced in 1950 that she was establishing a convalescent home for women. Various social and government entities, like convalescent homes, began to recognize that women had suffered a great deal, resulting in both physical and mental ailments that if not addressed, would place the already weakened family unit in jeopardy.

The initial idea behind the establishment of these facilities was to protect the family. Political and social views on the importance of the family and the role of mothers in the family were reflected in the creation of places like convalescent homes. To accomplish this, convalescent homes gave women a place where they could go to recover and rest for four weeks before returning home healthy to fulfill their duties as wives and mothers. It was believed that mothers were a vital aspect to a healthy family. Else Heuss-Knapp writes, "Whether there is darkness or light in a family depends entirely upon the mother."³⁵ For women, these convalescent homes acknowledged that they had needs that had been put aside while they cared for families. They were available to all German women for the purpose of taking time for themselves to rest and heal. Organizations like this helped women to overcome the immense challenges that they had dealt with for several years. They were a sign that the nation recognized that women came out of the war with their own battle scars, even if they were not always visible.

³⁴ Carpenter, "For Mothers Only," 865.

³⁵ Carpenter, "For Mothers Only," 867.

For German women, the years immediately following World War II meant survival in the face of chaos and change. These years meant hard work, little food, poor living conditions, stress and fear for women. They carried their families through this time, despite the many obstacles that stood in their way. The sacrifices they made for their families' survival are part of their contribution to the rebuilding of their country. Although there were a myriad of issues that they had to deal with, the change in how they viewed themselves and their role in society, marital problems, poverty, and violence all greatly impacted them. These were only a portion of the battles they faced during the rebuilding of their nation, and women often faced these trials alone. Many men did not return home from the war and others returned home after spending years in POW camps and battle but did not know how to readjust to life in a vastly different society than the one they left. This left the burden of caring and providing for the family on women's shoulders.

The result of their experiences was their discovery that they had a voice and a right to be heard and acknowledged. Although it would take many more years for them to achieve full equality in Germany, their experiences at the end of the war showed their country that they could do more than just give birth to new life. With their sacrifices, women bought themselves more recognition from society for their social achievements and their role within the family. Despite the decision of many women to return to traditional gender roles during the 50's, the war and its aftermath permanently altered gender relations. During this time both in West and East Germany, governments began to look seriously at women's issues and to start making

adjustments to laws and social structures to include women's rights. This is a direct result of the challenges women overcame during the postwar years. They learned that world belonged just as much to them as it did to men. They came through this refiner's fire with a stronger sense of purpose in a world once dominated by man.

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