

Women at Work: *SS Aufseherinnen* and the Gendered Perpetration of the Holocaust

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Abstract:

Grossly outnumbered by their male colleagues and largely forgotten by history, SS women experienced and implemented the Holocaust in gendered ways. SS *Aufseherinnen* guarded women imprisoned within the Nazi concentration camp system. Within this system, they devised strategies to conform to the prevailing male gender norms which governed camp culture. This work examines their training, their camp experience, their postwar trials, and the use of their images in postwar culture. These were ordinary women, but their experience was marked at every stage by their gendered otherness.

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2010, I arrived in Ravensbrück, the German concentration camp located northeast of Berlin. The camp maintains much of its wartime form, yet has shed the most overt signs of its grim past. The buildings pictured below once served as the barracks for the female camp guards called in German *Aufseherinnen*, and today they house a youth hostel.¹ Where the SS once lived and worked, children now play soccer and campers ride bikes.



I, too, stayed in these barracks and inhabited the space of the women I came to the camp to study. Staying in the rooms that had been theirs, walking their routes to and from camp, and seeing the same views from my windows presented me with an opportunity to normalize a geography and a past reality usually shrouded in the bizarre and monstrous. Sitting on my small porch writing emails home, I wondered about the letters they too must have written. Pausing to find my next sentence, I looked up, then wondered also, what filled their thoughts in the spaces

¹ The term *Aufseherinnen* translates as overseer.

² The photo on the left shows two of the 12 buildings that once housed the *Aufseherinnen*. The photo on the right is a view of the “SS village” from the front door of the former SS administration building, which now houses the archive of Ravensbrück. Directly behind the administration building is the former concentration camp itself. And to the left, just out of view is the small lake that bordered the camp and the “SS village.” The trees and buildings are all original; preserved though use by the Soviet army and later that of the GDR. After reunification the former site was expanded as a memorial and in 2002 the barracks of the *Aufseherinnen* were converted into a youth hostel.

between their lines. Later, in my room, I looked out the window to the building across the yard- what did they see when they looked out? Other women coming home from the camp and leaving their muddy boots on the porch to dry? Perhaps they paused to share a cigarette or chat with other women seated there, enjoying the summer breeze off the nearby lake. Was there laundry hung out the windows to dry? Could they, as I did now, hear music coming from the barracks next door? As I let my thoughts wander, a picture of the *Aufseherinnen* formed in my mind. They were young women, away from home, largely among their peers, and engaged in a common cause. Their days were long, their work difficult. And here, on the doorstep of the camp, they must have passed their time in very ordinary ways. By the time I arrived in Ravensbrück, I had already spent many years researching these women, and yet it took the experience of lightly floating in their reality, to codify my approach to their story. My visit not only provided me with the necessary archival materials, but also helped me see the wartime service of the *Aufseherinnen* as only a part of their lives rather than its totality. As I read and write about the *Aufseherinnen* I hesitate to see them only through the victors' lens, but instead as the young women of the 1940s I imagined them to be that summer night in Ravensbrück.

Background

During the course of the Second World War, approximately 3,500 women served as guards in the Nazi concentration camp system. In 1938, Heinrich Himmler created the corps of SS *Aufseherinnen* modeled on *Lottas-Svard*, a Finnish women's organization. This women's auxiliary group acted as the assistants to the *Schutzstaffel*, but were not actual members of the SS. Their purpose was to discharge men from tasks not directly related to combat. These auxiliaries were assigned to camp service throughout the network of concentration camps that

covered occupied Europe. A minority among the 51,000 men who served in the camp system, the *Aufseherinnen* were nonetheless responsible for tens of thousands of female prisoners.

The women who served as *Aufseherinnen* were primarily young, unattached, and not highly educated. While some *Aufseherinnen* were over forty, most were young women, on average aged 26. Of the 3,500 that served, only 14 percent were married and still fewer had children. They predominately came from rural areas of Germany and from working class or lower middle class backgrounds. Many were bakers, sales clerks, farm girls, factory workers, hairdressers, and housemaids. Most served without distinction and when the war ended, the majority left the camps and quietly returned to their civilian lives.

Though the state created the *Aufseherinnen* corps and eventually filled its ranks through conscription, the presence of women in the camps was a contradiction to the Nazis' ideal of women. Nazi policy advocated a return to the traditional roles for women and maintained that women should not participate in the business or political world, but rather focus on the home and supplying the *Reich* with a new generation of Germans. The government limited the number of female applicants to university, their numbers dropping from 20,000 in 1933 to 5,500 in 1939.³ It also removed them from some occupations. Other forms of wartime service, such as nursing and secretarial support military staff, fell within the acceptable range of women's work. Guarding prisoners in concentration camps alongside men, meanwhile, did not. And yet, the state needed women for exactly this task. The tension between the state's view of women and what it needed from them was felt acutely by the *Aufseherinnen*. The *Aufseherinnen* navigated their workplace and the demands of their job as women in a male dominated field. They faced discrimination, felt pressure to conform to male gender norms, and devised their own strategies to succeed. In this

³ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 201.

way, the study of a rather small group of women deepens our understanding of the perpetration of the Holocaust by examining the role of gender.

Methodology

Utilizing the vocabulary of the workplace and its pressures, challenges, and responsibilities, my research explores the recruitment and training, the camp service, and the postwar trials of these *Aufseherinnen*, and it examines their legacy as distorted through the lens of popular culture. By viewing the *Aufseherinnen* and the SS as state employees, it is possible to normalize their work and place it within the scope of modern employment. In order to understand their actions, I reconstruct their job and present their work from their perspective. For this reason, I do not belabor the use of violence by these women while in the camps. Although their violence is what they are most remembered for, we must bear in mind that such actions were used during the course of their job and were not the job itself.

Finding adequate documentation of the *Aufseherinnen* is problematic. There is a story that must be pieced together. Overall, fewer records were collected from female employees of the SS than from the men who were its members. Additionally, many camp records were destroyed by the camp administrators in the final days of the war. Therefore, it is difficult to follow any one woman through the entire process from recruitment, to training, to camp service, to trial, and into postwar life. They also left very few records themselves. In their postwar lives, *Aufseherinnen* did not write memoirs or frequently give interviews. Owing to the availability of sources, different individuals feature at different stages. Together, these individuals provide a more complete picture of the *Aufseherinnen* and their work.

Records from the Ravensbrück archive - including SS personnel files, application forms, training materials, camp procedure booklets, and internal memos - were particularly useful in reconstructing the recruitment and training process of the *Aufseherinnen* as evidenced in Chapter One.⁴ These sources also provided useful biographical information on a number of *Aufseherin*.⁵ Documentation from the archive at Bergen-Belsen - including Allied trial records, appeals materials, clemency requests, and press coverage of the Belsen trial - allowed me to follow the camp experience of the *Aufseherinnen* and their appearance in the postwar trials.⁶ In order to reconstruct these experiences, I did two different readings of these sources. My initial reading of the trial documents aimed to establish the perspective of the *Aufseherinnen* on their job and workplace. Their use of violence is described within this context. This formed the basis of Chapter Two. My second reading of the trial documents was more attuned to the trial setting itself. The same sources yielded surprising insight into their motivations and their naiveté.

These trial sources pose challenges. Statements given during the course of a trial must be read carefully and with the understanding of their context. While the possibility of dishonesty exists, it is possible to detect patterns and attempts at deception. I frequently accept the validity of the *Aufseherinnen*'s descriptions given in court as legitimate explanations of their actions as they perceived them. This does not mean their words aligned with reality, but with their

⁴ The Ravensbrück archive also contained several interviews of former *Aufseherinnen* collected ten years ago for the purpose of a special exhibit at the site of the Ravensbrück memorial. These interviews were to be used only for the exhibit where they referred to the women anonymously and then were sealed. The official archive catalogue lists these interview documents among their holdings, however, permission to view them is only granted by the families of the women who gave them. With the help of the archivist, I requested such permission and was denied. It is my hope to attempt this request again once my work is established. Such interviews are very rare. Fear of prosecution in ongoing attempts at postwar justice prevented many from speaking out, and in the case of those interviewed for the Ravensbrück exhibit, fear of embarrassment of their families who still live near the memorial.

⁵ Sources from the Ravensbrück archive include the particularly useful holdings of the National Archives of the UK: Public Record Office (PRO), War Office (W0) 311/198, which contained trial transcripts for the Ravensbrück trial and other court documents related to the trial.

⁶ Sources from the Bergen-Belsen archive contained holdings from the National Archives of the UK: Public Record Office (PRO), War Office (WO) War Office 317/235, which contained trial transcripts for the Belsen trial and other court documents related to the trial.

perception of it. Much to their own detriment, these female defendants were surprisingly candid, and as I demonstrate in Chapter Three, they failed to be strategically dishonest. I draw heavily from the transcripts of the Belsen trial. As the first trial of the Nazi system in the West, there was not an established formula of excuses given by defendants. Transcripts from later trials offer answers that were rehearsed and much less insightful, adhering to a narrative of denial, rather than failed explanation. Despite the challenge of these court documents, they are an invaluable source that gives voice to an otherwise silent group. For this reason I chose to quote the words of the *Aufseherinnen* frequently, rather than paraphrase and summarize their responses when noting their trial behavior.

Additional primary sources were obtained from the Auschwitz and Nuengamme archives. These materials provided additional background information. I also utilized survivor accounts, both published and in the form of affidavits, to form a richer description of the *Aufseherinnen* and their camp experience. And finally, the camps themselves were essential sources. Visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bergen-Belsen, Ravensbrück, and Nuengamme deepened my understanding of their geographies and their function as places of work.⁷ Without walking their grounds this project would not have been possible.

The person of Irma Grese presented a particular difficulty. Though the *Aufseherinnen* have largely been ignored by history, a few exceptions, such as Irma Grese were remembered. She was quite young, beautiful, and reportedly very cruel. This made her both atypical and an attractive stereotype for all female guards. As noted by historian Wendy Lower, in her study on female perpetrators in Nazi Germany, this made serious study of the *Aufseherinnen* problematic.⁸

⁷ I made additional visits to the camps of Sachenhausen and Dachau to extend my general background knowledge on the camp system.

⁸Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies* (Boston: Mariner, 2013), 15. Lower too omits discussion of Grese and indeed most *Aufseherinnen*.

The limited work completed on these women either ignores Grese altogether or overstates her importance. She is the most famous of the *Aufseherinnen* and yet she has not been contextualized within her group or workplace. I include Grese and a study of her actions, based on the sources as I read them, not as she has been sensationalized by others. In doing so, I unpack her infamy and provide a clearer understanding of this individual. Though she is not the typical *Aufseherin*, she is very important. As I demonstrate in Chapter Four, it is largely an image of her and her crimes that endures above all others.

Historiography

Despite their unique positioning within the camp system and their significance in illuminating perpetrator and gender history, surprisingly little attention has been paid to *Aufseherinnen*. The scholarship on these women is limited to a few volumes and articles. Daniel Patrick Brown produced two works, though neither provides in-depth analyses. His first book focuses on the life of Irma Grese.⁹ It is a case-study of one woman and the uniqueness of her experience makes her story only limitedly useful in understanding the average *Aufseherin*. He also accepts the established narrative that focused only on her youth and cruelty. Brown's second book, *The Camp Women*, is a compilation of primary resources and photographs of the *Aufseherinnen*.¹⁰ However, most of it consists of personal information copied from their SS files- date and place of birth, position, date of employment, and camps served- but it offers very little analysis of these materials. Brown's work fails to contextualize the *Aufseherinnen* within the reality of the workplace and misunderstands their position in the camp system. A few

⁹ Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Beautiful Beast: The Life and Crimes of SS-Aufseherin Irma Grese* (Ventura, CA: Golden West Historical Publications, 1996).

¹⁰ Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Camp Women: The Female Auxiliaries who Assisted the SS in Running the Nazi Concentration Camp System* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2003).

German works such as *Im Gefolge der SS: Aufseherinnen des Frauen-KZ Ravensbrück* by Simone Erpel, highlight the experience of a few *Aufseherinnen* who worked in Ravensbrück.¹¹ This volume uses different women to discuss various issues related to the *Aufseherinnen* and their memory. More recently Lower produced her study of female perpetrators, though she chose to focus on women in more traditionally female roles. Lower studied secretaries, teachers, and wives and daughters of male perpetrators, rather than the *Aufseherinnen*. She is concerned with showing the agency of women during the Hitler years, and disabusing her readers of the notion that women were passive victims of the Nazi regime. While I do not believe the *Aufseherinnen* were passive victims, I do contend that their agency was limited by their minority position in a male dominated workplace. I hold them responsible for the choices they made, yet recognize no decision is made in a vacuum. The story of these 3,500 women, who found themselves in an unlikely form of wartime service, warrants attention.

Although my work is unique in its focus on *Aufseherinnen* as women perpetrators, the area of perpetrator history is well-developed. The field has been generally split into two distinct camps of causation; those who believe genocide was carried out by individuals specifically motivated by Nazi ideology or personal abnormalities, and those who argue it was carried out by ordinary people. The first position developed in the immediate postwar period when attention focused on high-ranking Nazis and those who distinguished themselves through extreme acts of personal violence. Works such as Leon Polakov's *Harvest of Hate* and Eugen Kogon's *The Theory and Practice of Hell* emphasize the bestial nature of Nazi officials.¹² They assumed that those who designed and implemented the Final Solution were aberrations from normal society.

¹¹ Simone Erpel, *Im Gefolge der SS: Aufseherinnen des Frauen-KZ Ravensbrück* (Berlin: Metropol, 2007).

¹² Eugen Kogon, *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them*, trans. Heinz Norden (New York: Berkley Publication Corp, 1950) and Leon Poliakov, *Harvest of*

Although much of the scholarship within this tradition was published shortly after the war, the more recent works of Michael Mann and Yaacov Lozowick show resurgence in the position advocating ideology and the personal background of individuals as a motivating factor of behavior. Michael Mann's study asserts that a disproportionate number of perpetrators, especially those in the higher-ranking positions, held Nazi membership from an early date and had experience in sanctioned violence prior to their participation in genocidal acts.¹³ Although he admits his study is limited and self-biased, because of the nature of his sources, Mann's call to examine individual biographies and consider changing motives over the course of participation is useful. He strives to reassert the primacy of belief and of individuals rather than see perpetrators as "trapped" within systems of modernity or cultural bigotry.¹⁴

Likewise, Yaacov Lozowick wishes to return to the power of beliefs and assert that even within a totalitarian state, functionaries understood norms of right and wrong.¹⁵ Lozowick's study centers on Eichmann's bureaucracy and the Jewish experts and Gestapo personnel which it included. He argues that these people were not typical Germans, but long-time fanatical believers in Nazi ideology and strongly antisemitic. Although he emphasizes antisemitism, Lozowick links it to the perpetrators' research and scientific work rather than to a cultural predisposition.

In contrast to the arguments presented above, the second position articulated by historians of perpetrators asserts that genocide was committed by ordinary people. Since Hannah Arendt's seminal work on the "banality of evil" much scholarship has focused on the actions of the

Hate: The Nazi Program for the Destruction of the Jews of Europe, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1954).

¹³ Michael Mann, "Were the Perpetrators of Genocide 'Ordinary Men' or 'Real Nazis'? Results from Fifteen Hundred Biographies," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 14, no. 3 (Winter 2000), 331-366.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 333.

¹⁵ Yaacov Lozowick, *Hitler's Bureaucrats: The Nazi Security Police and the Banality of Evil*, trans. Haim Watzman (London and New York: Continuum), 2002.

ordinary people.¹⁶ This also follows the shift of Holocaust historiography from the Nazi hierarchy to that of survivors, and eventually to that of lower-ranking Nazi officials and civilians. Arendt's study of Adolf Eichmann concludes that he and many others like him were neither monsters nor sadists, "but terribly and terrifyingly normal."¹⁷ She asserts that the camps were not staffed by fanatics and natural murderers but by normal human beings.¹⁸ Arendt also emphasizes the role of bureaucracy and the ability of the modern state to institutionalize killing, thereby removing emotion and direct responsibility from the conscience of the perpetrator.

In the tradition of Arendt, Christopher Browning produced his study on the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101.¹⁹ His approach acknowledges the difficulties in explaining the behavior of large numbers of people and recognizes motivating factors such as social pressures, peer groups, and career considerations that influenced perpetrator behavior. His perspective and method also assume human universals. As his title, *Ordinary Men*, implies he holds that individuals, regardless of their nationality, are susceptible to these pressures. He also posits that brutal behavior can result from existence in a cruel situation, so that the "horrors of the initial encounter" eventually become routine and killing and cruelty are easier to perpetrate.²⁰

Though now widely ignored, yet significant to the historiography of perpetration, Daniel Goldhagen entered the perpetrator debate with his study also discussing Police Battalion 101. Goldhagen put forward his controversial theory of "eliminationist antisemitism."²¹ As his subtitle, *Ordinary Germans*, implies, Goldhagen argues that antisemitism among Germans was a

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

²¹ Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

particularly violent strain of European antisemitism that made Germans willing to eliminate Jews rather than culturally exclude them. The focus remains on the role of ordinary individuals, yet the nationality of these persons is at the heart of their motivation. Goldhagen's focus on antisemitism should not be confused with that of scholars in the ideological category; for him it was not an idea perpetrators chose to believe, but an organic cultural impulse. Although Goldhagen's ideas are rightly questioned by many Holocaust scholars, his emphasis on the role of antisemitism in perpetrator behavior was duly noted by historians.

Some scholars, such as George Browder, argue for a middle way between the two extremes of "hate-filled monsters" and "unemotionally obedient cogs."²² This proposed middle ground accepts that most perpetrators were originally normal yet through their actions became evil.²³ Browder concludes that the position on perpetrators taken by various scholars depends upon their underlying assumptions about human nature; as such it is unlikely that either position will entirely disappear.

Despite considerable debate, the emerging consensus among scholars in this field is that causation varied greatly depending upon the type of genocidal involvement. The motives of those at bureaucratic desk jobs were inherently different from the motives of those in the *Einsatzgruppen* and different still from the SS running the camp system. This trend toward combining what we know of basic human behavior and specific situational factors can only lead to the production of more nuanced accounts.

While perpetrator literature carefully considers numerous factors of motivation and diverse situational pressures, most studies begin with the presumption that perpetrators were male. They assume that the pressures faced by "ordinary men" equate with a human universal.

²² George C. Browder, "No Middle Ground for the *Eichmann Männer*?" *Yad Vashem Studies*, 31 (2003): 408.

²³ *Ibid.*, 407.

The glaring absence in this scholarship is deliberation about the position of women perpetrators within the Nazi system. Lower's work attempts to rectify this omission, but further studies are needed. If we attempt to make claims about human nature, we must consider a wider scope of humanity. We must also take into account what was uniquely experienced by these female perpetrators.

While Michael Mann's study included a handful of women, he discounts any agency in their participation. Although he admits his sources are inadequate to make any assessment, he posits that because of the subordinate role of women, their motives can be reduced to the process of following orders issued from their superiors, however, the fact that women constituted a minority of the perpetrators does not justify the lack of scholarship about their experiences.²⁴ Investigating women's wartime participation is especially important because their experiences and motives were often very different from what we know of male perpetrators. For example, Browning suggests that some members of Police Battalion 101 were motivated by the social pressure to conform to gender norms. They opted to kill to avoid appearing unmanly.²⁵ He also notes a clear sense of camaraderie among the men during both the war and in postwar trials. The *Aufseherinnen* in the camp system also felt a pressure to conform to standards of masculinity. This constituted an aberration from their own gender norms, rather than conformity to them, as seen in the cases of men. In addition, there was a marked absence of esprit de corps and group identity among *Aufseherinnen*. Some described personal friendships with the women they served with, but this reflected loyalty to individuals, rather than to their group.

The study of gendering the Holocaust is a relatively recent development and one which thus far has focused primarily on the experiences of survivors. Prior to the early 1990s, study of

²⁴ Mann, "Were the Perpetrators of Genocide 'Ordinary Men' or 'Real Nazis'?", 340, 356.

²⁵ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 231.

the different experiences of men and women in Nazi camps was discouraged. It was widely thought that comparisons were unnecessary and distasteful. Such critics sought to prevent a competition of suffering. Eventually, scholars such as Carol Ritter and Joan Ringelheim clarified that gender studies were not interested in proving whose suffering was the worst, but rather how men and women suffered in ways unique to their gender. Since that time scholars have produced quality works detailing the experience of female victims, yet the same attention has not been given to Nazi women perpetrators.²⁶

Claudia Koonz refutes the view that because women were traditionally subordinate in Nazi Germany they were non-actors.²⁷ Koonz details how employment and educational opportunities for women decreased under the Nazi government, yet argues that these women still had room to participate and condone the Nazi system. According to Koonz, women of the Reich must also share in the responsibility for its crimes. Although she discusses the role of women in this society, it is from a civilian and bystander perspective rather than one of enlisted women and direct perpetration.

Although *Aufseherinnen* are largely excluded from both perpetrator literature and discussion of gender in the Holocaust, the methods of several of the aforementioned scholars inform my analysis of this group. Like Arendt and Browning, I approach perpetration from the standpoint of human universals and situational causation. Additionally, I apply Browning's consideration of the numerous social pressures and material concerns to explain the participation of the *Aufseherinnen*. However, like Mann, I also understand the importance of individual background and biography in conducting my study; and I support Ringelheim's view that

²⁶ Though there is some progress in the field, as recently as this January, a paper proposal was rejected by an international conference on women and the Holocaust on the grounds that its subject, the *Aufseherinnen*, fell outside the scope of interest of the conference.

²⁷ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).

gendered study should avoid promoting the victimization of one gender over or by another gender. By offering a nuanced study of the *Aufseherinnen*, my work sits at the intersection of perpetrator and gender history. While Lower's work is most concerned with proving women acted as perpetrators, my work goes beyond this to show that their perpetration was gendered, not just that women acted as perpetrators. My work reveals gender had a major impact on the training, perpetration, and prosecution of the *Aufseherinnen*. It also clarifies a major difference between "following orders" and "doing a job." The former places responsibility externally, while the latter accepts accountability.

Before they became part of the camp system, the *Aufseherinnen* were ordinary women—farm girls, hairdressers, factory workers. Chapter One reconstructs their journey through the application process. The application materials reveal that the process took over a month and investigated the health, intelligence, and character of applicants. It also details the training course *Aufseherinnen* underwent once accepted. In many ways, this training course did not adequately prepare *Aufseherinnen* for their camp duties, particularly for their role in administering punishments.

Chapter Two details the workplace of the *Aufseherinnen*. It gives special attention to the challenges and pressures of their job and to their place as women in a male-dominated workplace. It removes the focus from the violence they employed and instead centers on the everyday tasks and responsibilities- such as supervising work details, producing rations, conducting *appell*, and delivering bread and wood- that made up the workday of the *Aufseherinnen*.

Chapter Three analyzes their performance in the courtroom when faced with Allied justice in the postwar period. It is also within the context of this chapter that the conditions of the

camp are described as they existed in reality and as seen by outsiders. This is in marked contrast to their presentation throughout much of the previous chapter, which depicts the camp as normalized by those who worked there every day. These female defendants navigated the legal system poorly and attempted to explain their actions, rather than deny the accusations against them. Additionally, Chapter Three demonstrates that the crimes of the *Aufseherinnen* were presented differently from those of their male colleagues, contributing to the false stereotype that women guards were crueler than their male counterparts. And it shows that the press coverage of these early trials further shaped the distorted image of the *Aufseherinnen*.

Chapter Four demonstrates that this false image became a part of popular culture representations of the *Aufseherinnen*. It examines the transmission of these images to the genres of “Stalag” fiction and “Nazisploitation” films. In these mediums the image of the “SS woman” was used to justify extreme violence against women. These low-brow books and films further transmitted the image of the “SS woman” to mainstream films that otherwise attempted accurate historical representations of the Holocaust.

During their service, their postwar trials, and in popular culture renderings of them, the experience of the *Aufseherinnen* was overlooked and lost. They experienced the Holocaust as ordinary women, subject to discrimination and pressed to conform to male gender norms; they navigated their workplace and jobs. Through their experience we can better understand perpetration and gender’s role in it.

CHAPTER ONE

Welcome to the SS *Aufseherinnen*: Recruitment, Application, and Training

Twenty-two year-old Hildegard Krüger was from a family of postal workers, she lived with her parents in Berlin, and in the spring of 1944 she applied for a new job. As with many government positions the application process was a multi-step procedure involving a personal questionnaire, a medical exam, and a background check. After proving she was physically fit and civically sound, while providing the usual information about past employment, Hildegard Krüger's application was approved. Now, she would begin training for her new position with the SS *Aufseherinnen* as a concentration camp guard.

The SS *Aufseherinnen* were ordinary women performing what would appear to be an atypical job, yet the methods of recruitment, application procedures, and benefits were standard for other forms of employment. Each step of this procedure transformed civilian women into military auxiliaries. This chapter gives special attention to the successes and failures of this process, and looks at the duties of both those in the general guard staff and those in charge. In order to do so, it utilizes documentation from the personnel file of Hildegard Krüger- her application and background check, training materials used at Ravensbrück, and manuals of camp conduct. It also includes newspapers, work cards, and pay schedules.²⁸ Understanding the stories of those who served as *Aufseherinnen* is as much about understanding the actions of

²⁸ Some of these have been collected in Daniel Patrick Brown's work *The Camp Women*. Though these latter sources have been published in other works, their compilation, organization, and analysis as presented here is original.

individuals as it is learning to place the Nazi system within our modern world. For some 3,500 women, this was the beginning of their journey: how they came to be involved with and inducted into the system of Nazi concentration camps and how they entered the consciousness of history.

Help Wanted

In 1938 the concentration camp system was expanding. Increasing numbers of women were being incarcerated for political reasons and transferred from prisons to newly created concentration camps for women. To free men for more difficult and important work, the job of *Aufseherin* was intended to be a position of women watching women. The position of *Aufseherin* was meant to be a temporary solution, not part of the yet-to-be-formulated Final Solution. Like many employers seeking workers, Nazi officials placed advertisements in newspapers. To attract applicants, the ads did not advocate an ideology, rather they explained the practical benefits of the job. For example this listing:

You have only to watch over prisoners; consequently, applicants, who should be between the ages of 21 and 45, don't need professional training. The salary of hired *Aufseherinnen*, who become employees of the Reich, is determined by [Schedule] TOA IX and a step raise will be given after a three month probationary period. Community food allotment as well as a well-furnished official residence and service clothes (fabric and fatigue uniforms) are assured . . .²⁹

On the one hand, the listing describes a civilian position rather than a military one. On the other hand, it describes the duties of a guard in the camp system as it existed in 1938 rather than what it became in later years. In 1939, the system would expand as a result of the war, and it was not yet the system that housed the Final Solution after 1942.

Advertisements appeared in 1938 calling for female guards, but did not mention the concentration camps. This job had desirable attributes: simple work was promised, along with a

²⁹ Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Beautiful Beast: The Life and Crimes of SS-Aufseherin Irma Grese* (Ventura, CA: Golden West Historical Publications, 1996), 26.

furnished residence, a uniform, a meal allotment, and a guaranteed raise. Moreover, since no previous professional training or experience was required the job was available to a broad range of applicants. This also reveals how simple officials believed the job to be. They were not seeking women with managerial skills, language abilities or even previous prison work. Applicants may have been drawn by the promise of “light physical work” and good pay, since *Aufseherin* wages were considerably higher than that of many other wartime jobs such as factory or hospital work.³⁰

Nevertheless, the number of volunteers did not match the growing needs of the system and the changes brought by the war. In 1943, the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* (Reich Labor Service) widened the age for female conscription from women aged 18 to 25 to include women aged 17 to 45, some of whom were drafted to guard duty.³¹ Ironically, as knowledge of the camps became more widespread, the limited attractiveness of the job decreased. After much effort to insure that German citizens understood that camp-incarceration was something to be avoided, encouraging civilians to volunteer for service in these same camps proved problematic.³²

Once drafted, *Aufseherinnen* were required to report for duty unless an exemption was secured. Because middle and upper class women either obtained exemptions from camp service more readily or were assigned to the *Helferinnen*-the secretaries and telecommunications workers within the camps- the workforce of guards was drawn primarily from the lower-middle and working classes. The *Helferinnen* are a useful comparison to the *Aufseherinnen*. These women did traditional secretarial work within camp offices and in other offices associated with

³⁰ Phillips, ed., *The Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-Four Others* (London: William Hodge and Company, 1949), 211.

³¹ Beginning in 1935 the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* made membership compulsory for German youth of both sexes between the ages of 18-25. This obligated members to serve their country in both military and civilian services. By 1938 the RAD was primarily focused on military projects.

³² Phillips, *The Trial of Josef Kramer*, 16.

the war effort. In addition to written postings, *Helperinnen* positions were advertised throughout Germany in newsreels. These films show happy, pretty, young women traveling the world in service to their country, doing a job that is fun and exciting and also within the acceptable range of employment for women.

Some women also entered the system because their employers demanded it. In order to increase profits and cut costs, many factory owners employed slave laborers from concentration camps. Because the law required that such workers be overseen by the SS and their auxiliaries, factory owners often compelled their employees to complete *Aufseherinnen* training so they could return to their factories and oversee the new slave labor force. Therefore, for many of these women - especially those originally trained to oversee factory work - their job and its venue did not change, only the job title.³³ Because we associate their position with the SS, it is tempting to think of this job as an opportunity for upward social mobility. *Aufseherinnen* did receive a good salary, but not the respect or position of SS men; they were, after all, assistants to the SS, not actually SS members. Some volunteered for the money or mobility, others were simply conscripted. Whatever brought these women to the world of the camps mattered little once they arrived.

Applications, Please

Joining the *Aufseherinnen* involved a multi-step application process that spanned several weeks. Because camp work was physically demanding, the process began with a physical examination by an SS-approved doctor. It was important that employees be healthy and not pregnant. Additional medical information was also recorded, including height, weight, eye color,

³³ See Belsen testimony of Klara Opitz, Ilse Forster, and Ida Forster. All state that their factory employers required that they attend training to become an *Aufseherin* so that they could use slave labor. PRO, WO 235/15.

body type, date of last menstrual cycle, and childhood and adult illnesses.³⁴ Though ads claimed the job was not physically demanding, the need for these exams proved somewhat to the contrary. The camps are rightly remembered as places of disease and physical distress for inmates; yet they impacted the health of their employees as well. Guards were susceptible to the diseases such as typhus that ravaged the camps, causing many guards to utilize their sick leave and benefits during their service. Though a certificate of health was required for duty, no further investigation was made into the genealogy of applicants, so long as they swore that they could “justify that they did not descend from Jewish parents or grandparents.”³⁵ This is in contrast to men seeking SS membership, who had to provide generations of racial and medical information to meet the high standards of *Rassenhygiene* (racial health). Women applying for the position of *Aufseherin* had to demonstrate personal health rather than racial health, yet another reminder that women were seen as employees of the SS rather than members.

After a doctor provided a health certificate, women completed an application for employment and a personal questionnaire form. Like many prospective government employers, SS officials were interested in the following:

1. Age
2. Marital status
3. Education level
4. Employment history and reasons for leaving past employment
5. Level of indebtedness
6. Civil and criminal convictions
7. Previous participation in military groups
8. Previous monthly income and rent
9. Parents' occupations
10. Whether or not their parents or their grandparents were Jewish
11. Whether or not they or their parents were involved in Communist activities
12. Whether or not the applicant participated in the Spanish Civil War or belonged to the French Foreign Legion

³⁴Hildegard Krüger, *Einstellungsuntersuchung*, 22 August 1944, KL Ravensbrück.

³⁵Hildegard Krüger, *Personal Fragebogen*, September 1944, KL Ravensbrück, p. 3.

13. Agreement to swear unconditional support to the Nazi state and acknowledge any false answers would result in dismissal and punishment.³⁶

Interestingly, the application sought to elicit three types of information: standard demographic information (1,2,3,9); standard financial, criminal, military, occupational information (4,5,6,7,8); and the political information in keeping with the Nazi state, and other government work (10,11,12,13). Finally the applicant was required to state “I swear the SS has no grounds to reject my application or find me unsuitable for a position with the government.”³⁷ Thus officials were hiring government workers to engage in orderly state employment and they had clear standards for the individuals they selected.

Next, an applicant was given a written exam. The questions from one such test are listed below.

1. When did the Russian Campaign begin?
2. When did the first German train line begin operation and on what stretch did it connect?
3. What are the names of the peninsulas in the south of Europe?
4. What is the name of the island on which Napoleon was exiled the second time?
5. What is the meaning of the abbreviation SS?
6. $\frac{1}{2}$ divided by $\frac{1}{4}$ =
7. When and where was the Führer born?
8. What is the purpose of the sterilization law?
9. Which hereditary diseases do you know?
10. How heavy is a kilogram of iron?
11. Which countries have a border on the Mediterranean Sea?
12. What was the darkest day of the movement?
13. Who discovered printing?
14. What is race?
15. $46,131 - 13,794$ divided by $9 \times 2 + (3/4 + 0.10)$ divided by $(3/9 \text{ divided by } 1/27) - 999.15 =$
16. Where did Adolf Hitler write the book *Mein Kampf*?
17. Where does the Danube begin and end?
18. Who is the military commander of the Native German Army?
19. Which seas does the Suez Canal connect to?

³⁶ Hildegard Krüger, *Personal Fragebogen*, September 1944, KL Ravensbrück, p. 1-3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

20. What does *Weltanschauung* mean?³⁸

The questions reflected the type of common knowledge most citizens possessed. First, applicants had to demonstrate a basic understanding of history and geography, with some emphasis on Nazi history, facts that would have been familiar to most Germans at the time. Second, they had to answer some basic questions about sterilization, hereditary disease, and race, aspects of Nazi ideology that would also have been familiar. Third, questions like “How heavy is a kilogram of iron?” suggest that officials were concerned with the women’s common sense, as well. Detailed comprehension of obscure aspects of party ideology was not required; nor did one need to be a Nazi ideologue to be admitted as an *Aufseherin*. Interestingly, the exam also supports the Nazi ideal that women should not be political; basic knowledge of the state and party reflected good citizenship, but political ideology was better left to men.

Nor did the SS want criminals; rather they wanted trustworthy, law-abiding citizens. Thus, in addition to asking applicants to disclose any civil or criminal convictions, officials also had the Gestapo conduct background checks.³⁹ This not only belies the notion that the camps were staffed with the criminally predisposed, but it also reveals one of the greatest ironies of the Nazi state: namely, that the Nazis created a brutal and oppressive system that they sought to staff with individuals who were not previously accustomed to violence. The contradiction is telling, for it demonstrates that although the camp system was deliberately cruel and murderous, its implementation was intended to be controlled, purposeful, and even rational. Therefore background checks remained a part of the application process even during the final months when labor shortages were at a high and internal order at a low.

³⁸ BDC-National Archives II, “Examination Questions for SS-Auxiliaries” in Brown, *The Camp Women*, 235-237.

³⁹ Hildegard Krüger *Geheime Staatspolizei, Staatspolizeileitstelle Berlin*, 31 October 1944, KL Ravensbrück.

After passing the written exam and background check, applicants signed a series of contracts. In one contract, they swore to protect the secrets of their work and not to disclose the details of their workplace even after their service ended. Any violation to this oath of secrecy would result in punishment.⁴⁰ This agreement was typical of government or military service and should not be interpreted as specific to the perpetration of mass murder. In another contract they agreed to conceal information from prisoners working within the camp and to keep all knowledge of prisoner treatment and documents from them, a procedure standard to prisons and not specific to the concentration camps. Still other contracts prohibited guards from overseeing prisoners in work details that had not been approved by the appropriate department manager; nor were they to allow prisoners to overhear conversations pertaining to official business or the running of the camp.⁴¹

The last piece of required pre-training paperwork completed was an oath of loyalty:

The Führer decides the life and death of a public enemy. No Nazi is entitled to strike or physically abuse an opponent of the state. I hereby give my word of honor that I will obey the instruction of the Führer in all levels, to that I give my signature.⁴²

A simple promise that demonstrated the difference between personal violent acts and violence expressed in service of the state. As official extensions of the state, guards could take physical action against prisoners for punishment; however, they were forbidden from striking prisoners for personal reasons. To those administering punishment, their justification was lawful and rational. To those receiving punishment, it was further abuse from an unjust and irrational system.

⁴⁰ Hildegard Krüger, *Verhandlung*, 5 September 1944, KL Ravensbrück.

⁴¹ Hildegard Krüger, *Erklärung*, 9 September 1944, KL Ravensbrück.

⁴² Hildegard Krüger, *Ehrenwörtliche Verpflichtung*, 13 December 1944, KL Ravensbrück.

Salary and Benefits

It is easy to forget or overlook the mundane details of employment such as taxes and food allotment, healthcare, sick leave, family care, salary, and taxes. *Aufseherinnen* were well-paid and furnished with uniforms, shoes, and stockings. Pay was based on age and seniority: an unmarried beginner in her early twenties was allotted 125 *Reichmarks* per month, while married women drew 135 *Reichmarks* per month.⁴³ If a woman had children and her husband did not receive the dependents' allowance, she obtained an additional 10 *Reichmarks* for every child.⁴⁴ Each woman would also have the following amounts deducted from her monthly pay: 7.50 *Reichmarks* deducted for taxes, 2.40 *Reichmarks* for compulsory membership fees for the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* (Nazi Labor Front), and 10 *Reichmarks* for a disability and illness fund. She was also charged 1.20 *Reichmarks* a day for food and drink and 5 *Reichmarks* per month for lodging, or 15 *Reichmarks* if she requested a private room.⁴⁵ Though there was no guarantee of its award, women could also request vacation leave from their postings as well as transfers to different camps within the system.

Welcome to the *Aufseherinnen*

The process of application to acceptance took about a month, after which applicants were assigned to a training program. Though designed to prepare them for many aspects of their job, training procedures often fell short of this goal. It is my contention that poor training resulted in increased workplace difficulties, for both guards and prisoners alike. Almost all of the 3,500 *Aufseherinnen* were instructed at Ravensbrück, the all-female concentration camp northeast of Berlin. The standard duration of training was three weeks, but depending on wartime circumstances it might vary from one week to six months. Early in the war, training procedures

⁴³ The equivalent of 50-54 USD. This made for an annual salary of 1,500RM.

⁴⁴ Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück*, trans. Gerald Satterwhite (New York: Anchor Books, 1975), 67.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

were more systematic and official, but as the war turned against Germany, training time was increasingly shortened.⁴⁶

Though successful in some areas, training in Ravensbrück was more orderly and life more organized than elsewhere in the camp system; consequently, trainees were unprepared for the chaotic conditions they encountered in their actual workplaces.⁴⁷ Ravensbrück was established in 1939 to alleviate the population of women's prisons throughout Germany. Throughout most of its existence Ravensbrück primarily housed political prisoners of the Reich; although Jewish women were imprisoned there, the camp did not predominantly contain Jewish women. Therefore, training did not focus on antisemitic rhetoric, but rather more generally on guarding enemies of the state and managing large groups of prisoners. This further emphasizes the position of the *Aufseherinnen* as not designed for facilitating genocide.

Upon arrival at Ravensbrück, trainees were issued simple gray uniforms which included a hat, coat, sweater, and five pairs of socks. The uniforms were official, but basic, unlike the well-tailored, imposing uniforms issued to SS men.⁴⁸ They were photographed for their work cards, and were then assigned to one of 12 barracks that served as housing for the *Aufseherinnen*. The barracks were located just outside the main camp, separated from it by the SS administration building and a parade ground. Here in this SS village they would spend their non-working hours. For many that came from small towns and villages, arrival in Ravensbrück, a complex of tens of thousands, was the largest grouping of people they had experienced.⁴⁹

Even the basic geography of the camp reflected the position of the *Aufseherinnen* within SS hierarchy. All women were assigned to two-story, multi-roomed structures, where they would share a room with other guards. Built on an embankment overlooking the women's village were single-family houses assigned to SS men in the camp administration and their families.

⁴⁶ Many defendants in the Belsen trial who trained in 1944 spoke to the brevity of their training.

⁴⁷ Quality of environment refers to the working conditions of the SS and not the experience of prisoners.

⁴⁸ Uniforms issued to the men had the benefit of design by Hugo Boss. Beginning in 1933 Hugo Boss and his family-run business manufactured uniforms for many government workers.

⁴⁹ PRO, WO 235/15, Appeal Memo 1946.

Regardless of marital status, or position within the camp, women guards did not receive private residences; not even Dorothea Binz, who served in the camp leadership from 1941-1945.⁵⁰ Though women guards comprised almost the entirety of the workforce in Ravensbrück, they had only to look out their windows at the male officer housing positioned above them to be reminded of their secondary status. The entrance to the concentration camp was a short walk from the barracks. Ravensbrück consisted of 18 prisoner barracks: among them, a sickbay, a prison block, and several factories. The inmate population varied from 10,000 in 1942 to 50,000 at its peak in 1945.⁵¹ Like many camps it suffered from eventual overcrowding and undersupply-factors that exacerbated prisoners' suffering and presented the guards with additional challenges.

Trainees who arrived at Ravensbrück were primarily instructed by Dorothea Binz, the head *Aufseherin*. A talented woman, Binz was promoted quickly, rising to the level of *Oberaufseherin* by age 20. She began her service in Ravensbrück in 1939 and remained there for the entire war. Her experience in various positions within the camp gave her knowledge useful in the training of other guards and a comprehension of the evolution of the camp. Her behavior set the standard for those who trained under her direction.⁵² Women were always trained by women, a practice that reinforced an attitude of hierarchy and separateness from the men who served in the camps. This highlights another difficulty; although they were not trained by men, they were expected to adhere to a male, military code of behavior.

⁵⁰ First as assistant *Oberaufseherin* and then *Oberaufseherin*.

⁵¹ Figures confirmed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005199>, <http://www.ravensbrueck.de/mgr/index.html>

⁵² PRO, WO 235/302 Ravensbrück Trial

Training

Training focused on the ideology of the job and the state and the practical procedures expected of them, yet little instruction was given in the administration of punishments and the use of violence. *Aufseherinnen* were instructed in the Nazi *Weltanschauung*. This shaped their attitude toward prisoners and insured that they would view prisoners as dangerous enemies of the state. They were also repeatedly reminded that any personal dealings with inmates- even conversations- were forbidden. Many of the younger women would have belonged to the *Bund deutscher Madel* (League of German Girls, BdM), where they would have been introduced to Nazi ideology.⁵³ This instruction built on that foundation. By 1944 ideological instruction was condensed to a 30 minute speech given to new recruits while they were on parade.⁵⁴ This further illustrates the subordinate position of ideology in the training process.

Instruction in punishment and violence was provided on a very general level. More attention was given to the *attitude* toward punishment, rather than to specific types of punishments. *Aufseherinnen* were taught that pain must be “relegated in the most dehumanized position, employing the maximum severity, but always in such a way that the pain was inflicted dispassionately and with the utmost discipline.”⁵⁵ The guidelines for punishments were created by Hilmar Wäckerle, the first commandant of Dachau concentration camp in 1933, and minimally revised by Theodor Eicke when he replaced Wäckerle in 1934. This *Lagerordnung* was officially adopted as the penal code for the entire camp system including camps for women such as Ravensbrück. Its general ideas established the tone and attitude of camp discipline.

⁵³ Girls’ division of the Hitler Youth. After 1936 membership was mandatory for all girls ages 10-18. The BdM used a variety of methods, including holiday trips, sports, and folk traditions to indoctrinate girls with the ideology of National Socialism and to prepare them for their proper role of wives and mothers. After 1939, the BdM focused activities on aiding the war effort. The BdM was officially disbanded and prohibited after Germany’s loss of the war. See Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland* for a more detailed discussion of this organization.

⁵⁴ Anna Hempel, Belsen Trial PRO, WO 234/15, 13.

⁵⁵ *Lagerordnung*, KL Ravensbrück. 1940.

Any trace of pity revealed to enemies of the state was unworthy of an SS-man. There was no place in the ranks of the SS for soft hearts and any such [man] would do well to retire quickly to a monastery. He [KL-Dachau Commandant Theodor Eicke] could only use hard, determined men who ruthlessly obeyed every order . . . They were the soldiers who even in peace time face the enemy day and night, the enemy behind the wire . . .⁵⁶

These guidelines, created by male military officers for use on male prisoners were not amended when the camp system was expanded to include women as both guards and prisoners.⁵⁷ Thus, *Aufseherinnen* were expected to embrace a code of behavior that defined camp culture as both male and military, yet their training was conducted exclusively by women. Moreover, women who entered this system had to learn to perceive themselves as military auxiliaries and to be comfortable with a level of violence that was to be used against prisoners and even themselves.

As their paperwork indicated, violations of camp protocol would result in punishment. The *SS Disziplinarstraf und Beschwerdeordnung* (Disciplinary and Penal Code, SS-DBO), a manual concerned only with the discipline of the SS and not the prisoners, detailed the disciplinary recourse for SS violations of camp rules and acquainted *Aufseherinnen* with this regimented military workplace. Though they were civilian employees, camp guards were still subject to punishment only by SS courts.⁵⁸ The DBO defined punishment as “a means of

⁵⁶ Rudolf Höss, *Commandant of Auschwitz* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1959), appendix 8.

⁵⁷ Both Hilmar Wäckerle and Theodor Eicke were veterans of WWI. As commandant Eicke reorganized Dachau and made it into the model for future camps. Under his leadership the camp took on more military qualities and prisoners were issued uniforms. In 1934, Eicke’s success earned him promotion to the position of Concentration Camps Inspector and by 1935 he began a reorganization of the camp system. For more on Eicke see Harold Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau: The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp, 1933-2001*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

⁵⁸ The DBO was adopted 1 September, 1943 and applied to all SS members as well as all auxiliaries and trainees. These individuals were subject to trial and punishment only by SS courts for all disciplinary and criminal offenses they might commit. Its authority extended throughout Germany and its occupied territories. Punishments ranged from simple disciplinary actions, to expulsion from the SS to death by shooting or beheading. For more analysis of the DBO see Robert Ferguson and Robin Lumsden, *Himmler’s SS: Loyal to the Death’s Head*, 9.

education to be implemented with honor befitting the SS and the German race.”⁵⁹ Fair and dispassionate behavior was encouraged. The personal feelings and attitudes of an SS member were not to affect the punishment assigned or its administration. Members were urged to consider the specifics of each new offense and offender and “respond with a punishment appropriate to that specific situation rather than having a mechanical response,” and they were to start small and build if subsequent offenses occurred.⁶⁰ The remainder of the sixty-three-page manual listed offenses and corresponding punishments.

Camp administrators and SS officials wanted a clear, uniform system to deal with the punishment of their own. However, they were far less clear or uniform when establishing a useful code of discipline for prisoners; thus, there was no similar manual to guide the guard force in their decisions. Although the *Lagerordnung* was designed to be such a guide, it listed offenses and punishments that belonged to the early days of Dachau and quickly became outdated and useless in the rapidly evolving camp system. For example, most offenses were to be punished with periods of hard, severe, or punitive labor, ranging from three to 21 days and restricted rations of bread and water for the duration. Possible offenses included: wearing civilian clothing, collecting signatures for the purpose of grievance, sending more than two postcards a month, allowing vermin to infect their person or bunk, cursing symbols of the Nazi party, and avoiding work. More severe infractions included: sabotage, assault of an SS officer, and agitating rebellions. These could be punished by flogging or death.⁶¹ Procedure required that all offenses be documented and reported to the camp administration. Punishments were to be carried out in the presence of the guard who made the report, an interrogation officer, the commandant, an SS

⁵⁹*SS Disziplinarstraf und Beschwerdeordnung*, Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter-Partei Schutzstaffel, Berlin, 1943, 9.

⁶⁰DBO, 10

⁶¹*Lagerordnung*, KL Ravensbrück. 1940.

doctor, and a unit of SS guards. Both the list of offenses and punishment procedures rendered the *Lagerordnung* useless. It was not rewritten to accommodate the changing nature of the camps; therefore, guards had no guidelines to assist them in the punishment of the most common camp offenses, such as stealing. Nor did officials anticipate the overwhelming frequency of violations due to the conditions of camps, making such formal rituals of punishment impossible. Though this manual existed, it was so unusable by the time women entered the guard force that there is little evidence *Aufseherinnen* were ever presented with its contents.

Following ideological instruction and an introduction to camp rules, new employees received practical instruction in day-to-day matters of camp life, such as how to detect sabotage and work slow-downs and how to prevent and punish escapes, and in other skills necessary for managing and maintaining order over an imprisoned population. The most common situations *Aufseherinnen* were taught to manage involved the transportation of prisoners from camp to camp via truck and train, the loading and unloading of such transports, the transfer of prisoners to work details both inside and outside camps, and the supervision of prisoner labor in both indoor and outdoor details. Trainees were warned about the dangers of distracted or inattentive guards and of a failure to maintain clear order and distance with prisoners, especially during any form of transport. They were also instructed to limit prisoner interaction with other prisoners that were not directly related to the work detail.

Instruction took place through a variety of methods: lectures, readings, and practical “on the job” experience. One of the more creative approaches authorities used was a picture book depicting correct (*Richtig*) and incorrect (*falsch*) methods of dealing with typical workplace scenarios, such as those listed above.⁶² Though cartoonish in appearance and comically light in nature, the pictures illustrated the type of activities trainees should expect to engage in, as well as

⁶²*Bilderbuch für Posten im KL Dienst Ravensbrück*, KL Ravensbrück, 1940.

potential problems associated with these job assignments, thus enabling even the most poorly educated trainees to understand what officials considered to be the most critical duties of the job. As further reminders of the male, military culture of the workplace, the figures drawn within these booklets are all male. Though written and used to train women, no women are included either as guards or as prisoners in these drawings. Women were expected to universalize to a male norm and this universalizing began during training.

The page below, labeled as figure one, features two male guards charged with escorting a small group of prisoners to their work place. Along the way, a woman on a bicycle passes them. The picture featuring the incorrect behavior shows the male guards shouldering their weapons, as they smile and wave at the passing woman. The prisoners talk among themselves, and remove their caps at the sight of the woman. In the correct version, the guards maintain their straightforward gaze, weapons trained on the prisoners, whose eyes remain forward as they march in silence. Though dealing with the general hazard of distraction, this picture presents the issue in a comical manner, specific to men, and has little to do with its intended female audience. Other images, such as figures two and three, remind women of the contracts they signed promising not to have personal dealings with prisoners, or let them talk to each other during work details.



Figure 1-Guarding a small group of prisoners on the way to an outside work site.

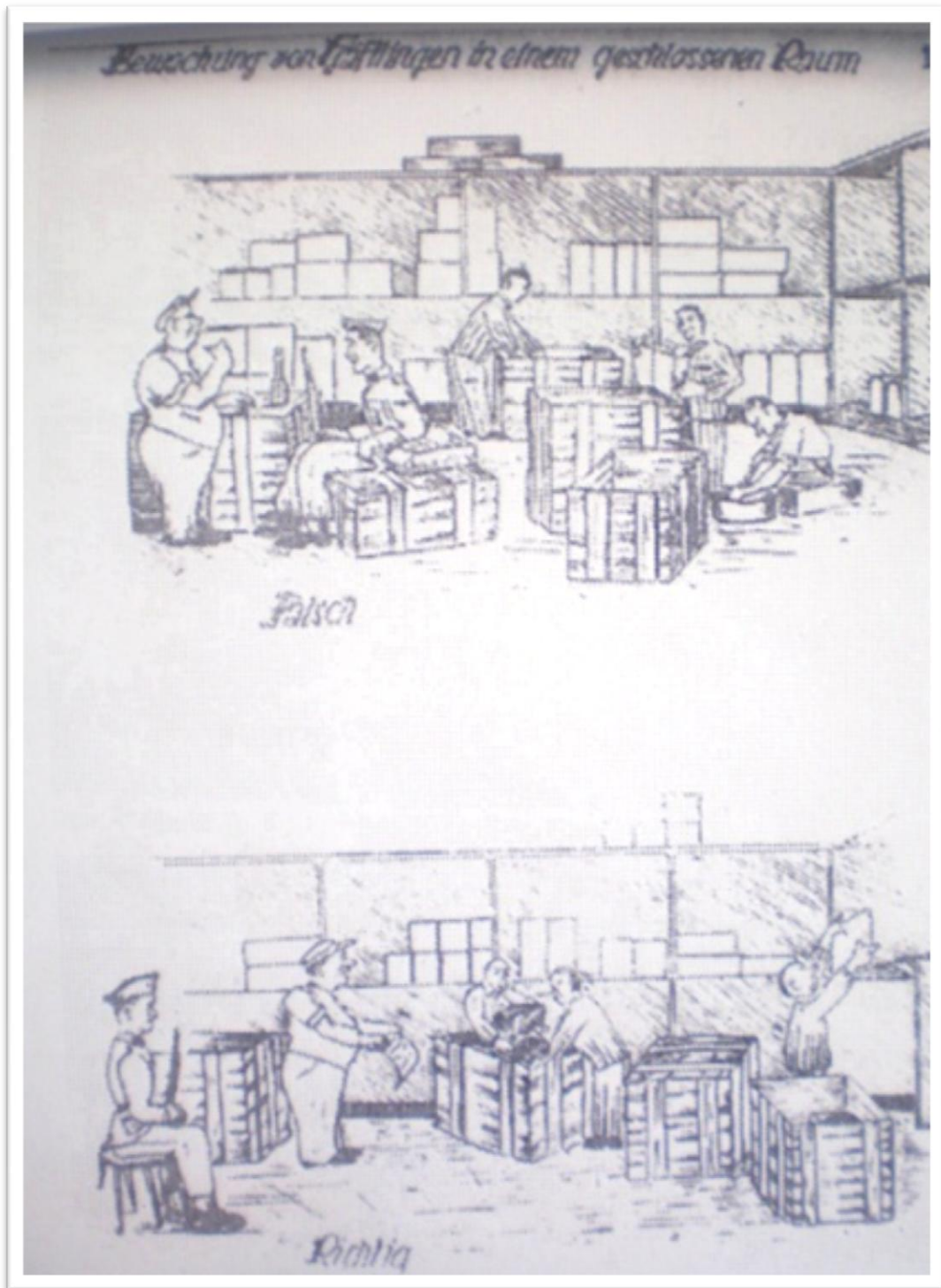


Figure 2-Guarding prisoners in the sorting room.

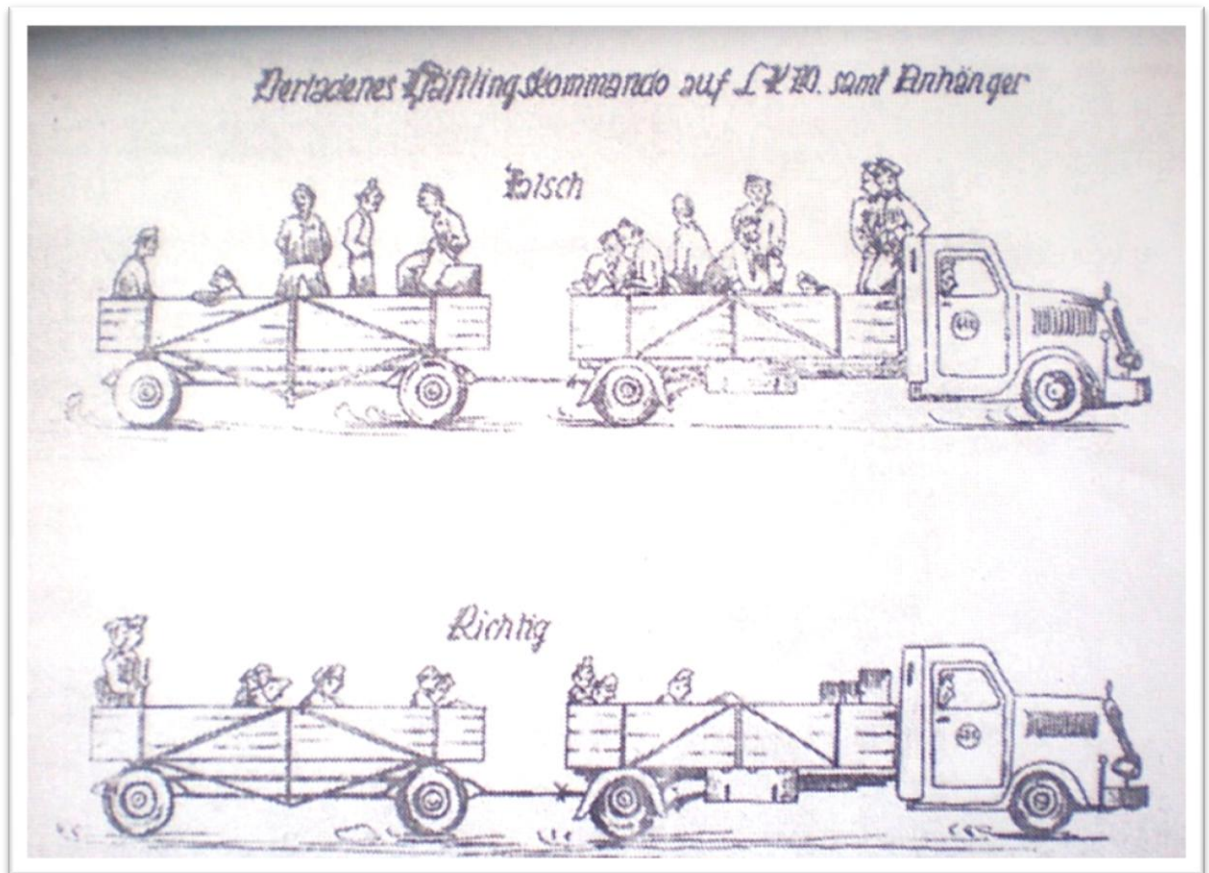


Figure 3- Transferring prisoners from camp on a trailer.

These images depict relaxed guards talking with prisoners, or prisoners talking among themselves. Many show weapons not at the ready or guards not maintaining a safe distance from the prisoners. In these images prisoners are allowed to gather and socialize, while guards fail to watch every prisoner's move vigilantly. These pictures also illustrate the potential problems associated with these breaches of protocol. Notice also the simplicity of the captions, which give no additional instructions.

Others, such as figures four and five, deal with the use of violence, albeit in a very general way. The first shows the correct and incorrect method of unloading a transport. In the incorrect illustration the guards are positioned too closely, causing direct and violent encounters with prisoners. In the correct picture the guards maintain proper distance, and the use of violence is avoided altogether. Like the majority of the situations depicted in this manual, instruction is focused on preventative measures. The second page shows the correct and incorrect way to deal with an escape attempt. Two prisoners are working, while a third runs away. In the incorrect picture, upon seeing the escaping prisoner, one guard alerts his fellow guard, but takes no immediate action. In the correct picture, the first guard shoots all three prisoners before alerting his coworker. In the matter of escape, guards were expected to act quickly, even if that meant reacting with surplus violence. Of the entire 30-page booklet, only these two pages deal with violence. There are no pages depicting punishments for other common infractions such as stealing or violence towards other prisoners.

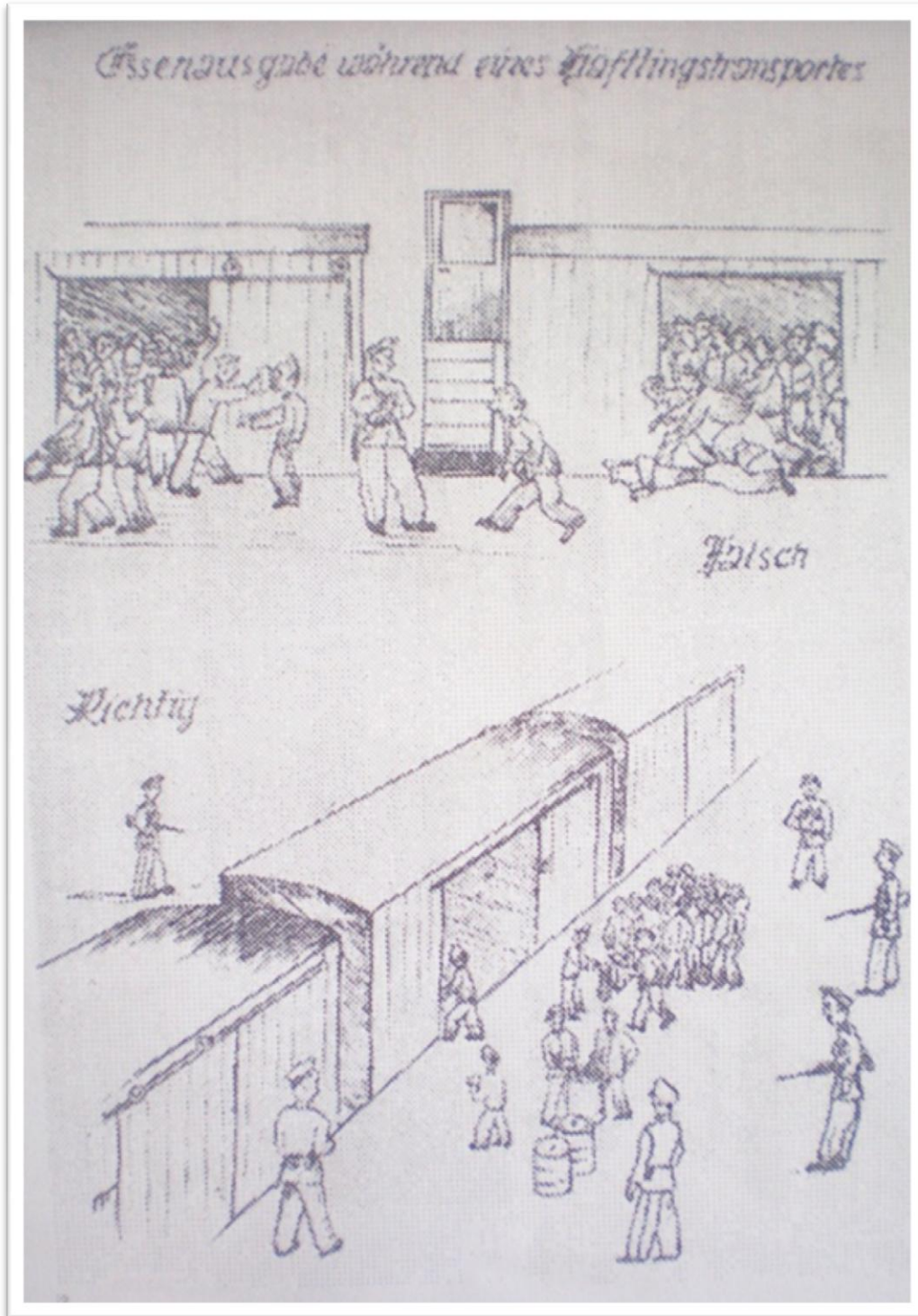


Figure 4- Coordinating the arrival of a prisoner transport.



Figure 5- Guarding prisoners out in the open

Prisoners often mention whippings by guards, yet the extant training materials display no evidence of its official instruction- a curious omission, in view of the detailed instructions given for punishments for guards, a much rarer occurrence. This most probably indicates that officials did not understand the nature of the work these women would undertake, rather than an attempt to keep these procedures secret. It is even possible it did not occur to them that such procedures would be needed to execute what they considered to be a simple job. Such miscalculation left the application of punishment and violence to the guards' discretion, which resulted in an uneven application and no standard. It is possible that many women reacted with a surplus of violence simply because they lacked the ability to discern the appropriate level, or the level that would be acceptable to their supervisors. In a system that relied on learning by example, many came to emulate the behavior of those around them.

Though all of the pictures feature male guards carrying rifles, women were not officially issued side arms or other types of weapons. Nevertheless, overseers in Ravensbrück and throughout the camp system often did manage to obtain and use firearms as well as whips and rubber truncheons. At one point Josef Kramer, the commandant of Birkenau, prohibited the use of whips; still many women continued to employ them.⁶³ Some women were also armed with guard dogs and served as *Hundeführerinnen*. They trained and cared for the police dogs of the camp, which were intended to deter and prevent inmate escape and ease personnel shortages.

In addition, the training process did not mention communicating camp regulations to prisoners, nor was it designed to address the issue of guarding a multinational and multilingual population. This created a great deal of disorder because prisoners could not understand what infractions they had committed. This gap in training was exacerbated by the demographic of

⁶³ Phillips, ed., *The Trial of Josef Kramer*, 256.

guards, most of whom spoke only German, while the prisoners spoke dozens of languages and dialects.⁶⁴

The initial conditioning and training was intense and demanding. Women were expected to absorb a large amount of procedural information, and to acclimate to the environment of the camp life. This transformation from civilian to military auxiliary was a process for every *Aufseherin*. One *Aufseherin* described her three weeks of training as mentally demanding and physically challenging. Not only were women learning how to administer punishments, they themselves were subjected to discipline from the SS administration as was outlined in the DOB.

These punishable offenses most often related to personal relationships with inmates. The punishment of lashes to the buttocks usually associated with prisoners could also be applied to *Aufseherinnen* on occasion for leniencies such as assisting inmates or giving them extra food rations. In practice, punishment for leniency was rarely administered. One woman, Annalisa Kohlmann, was well-known for bringing extra food from her family's farm to the prisoners of Neuengamme. She was not punished by camp officials, though she was accused by prisoners of favoring the young and pretty with her extra rations.⁶⁵ Though rarely administered, the possibility of corporal punishment is a reminder of the military nature of their posting and of their position in the camp hierarchy. Despite how it appeared to camp inmates, rules applied to guards.

This process of acclimation was apparent even to the prisoners within the *Aufseherinnen*'s charge, who recalled that many women were frightened upon entering the camp

⁶⁴ In some cases guards employed prisoner translators to assist them. Perhaps the most famous of all prisoner translators was Mala Zimetbaum who was imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau from 1942-1944. Proficient in five languages, she was renowned among inmates. Zimetbaum was equally famous for her death, when in 1944 she and her boyfriend were sentenced to execution in Birkenau following a failed escape attempt. In front of the assembled prisoners, she slit her wrists before she could be hanged, after which she became a symbol of resistance.

⁶⁵ PRO, WO 234/15

and beginning their service. Sometimes prisoners made a game of measuring the time it would take a new *Aufseherin* to “win her stripes.” French prisoner and anthropologist Germaine Tillion recounted such an event: “One little *Aufseherin*, twenty years old, who was at first so ignorant of proper camp ‘manners’ that she said ‘excuse me’ when walking in front of a prisoner, needed exactly four days to adopt the requisite manner, although it was totally new to her.”⁶⁶ According to prisoners, the average time of orientation lasted between a week and a month. While the transformation for most was relatively quick, some never became accustomed to the camp and their job. Tillion remembered one very young guard who was never able to adapt to the “debauchery” and “brutality” that surrounded her. She even cried in front of prisoners, and no one knew what became of her or if she was released from the SS to be transferred to other war work. In Tillion’s experience, only about half of those trained embraced the demands of the job.⁶⁷

After completing the training course, they were assigned by the camp administration to assist other *Aufseherinnen* with their duties. The duration of this assignment depended upon the stage of the war. In the final months, women were sent directly into service after only a week of training. This trial indicated whether or not women were ready for duty. If they succeeded in impressing their superiors, they were transferred to one of the approximately 10,000 camps, sub-camps, and juvenile protective custody camps that needed guards for their female populations.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Tillion, *Ravensbrück*, 69.

⁶⁷ Tillion is referring to the way in which the women carried out their job, not that only half of beginning *Aufseherinnen* stayed on. Since most were conscripted it was very difficult to be dismissed from the SS.

⁶⁸ At some camps, such as Ravensbrück, the overseers were predominately female, and many new *Aufseherinnen* remained where they trained. While the greatest number of women served at Ravensbrück (958 of the 3500 trained), other camps such as Flossenbürg, Gross-Rosen, and Neuengamme had large *Aufseherinnen* populations. For most of the war, Bergen-Belsen’s female overseer numbers were fairly low, but as camps in the East began evacuations, their ranks increased as inmates and guards from camps such as Auschwitz poured in. Auschwitz itself employed 56 *Aufseherinnen*, including Irma Grese.

If, however, they fell short of their supervisors' expectations they could be required to repeat portions of the training course.⁶⁹

With their training complete, women signed three final forms. In the first form, they reaffirmed that they understood that they were forbidden to have any personal dealings with prisoners, that prisoner property was not to be taken, and that they were subject to punishment by the SS should these rules not be followed. In the second form, they promised to be punctual and conscientious in their duties. In the third form, they confirmed they had been instructed in the handling of prisoners and in the obligations of their employment.⁷⁰ And now these women were fully, contractually employed by the SS.

Unlike SS men who were bound in a lifelong brotherhood, women were contracted to perform a temporary job.⁷¹ It is also worth noting that their final documents included a promise to do their job well. As will be seen in later chapters, this was a promise many took seriously, even though they were not vowing to be life-long members of the SS. The average *Aufseherin* entering camp life was young, unattached, literate but not highly educated, and accustomed to physical work in subordinate positions. Most came from rural areas of Germany from agricultural backgrounds that had familiarized them with a harder way of life. Those not from rural areas were almost all from working class or petit bourgeois backgrounds. Many had been housemaids, sales clerks, bakers, gardeners, and factory workers.⁷² While some *Aufseherinnen* were over forty, most were in their twenties- the average age 26. Because they had come of age under the Nazi regime, the NSDAP and its educational institutions exerted a certain influence on their adult character. Though marriage and motherhood were permitted, of the 3,500 women

⁶⁹ Phillips, ed., *The Trial of Josef Kramer*, 227.

⁷⁰ Hildegard Krüger, *Erklärung*, 13 December, KL Ravensbrück

⁷¹ Women did not get identifying tattoos, as the men did. Of course, later, this lack of permanent marking proved useful when escaping prosecution.

⁷² Phillips, ed., *The Trial of Josef Kramer*, xxxix.

who served, just 14 percent were married and fewer still had children.⁷³ Younger, less educated and less worldly than their male colleagues, their prewar life influenced their readiness to adapt to camp life and the responsibilities of their job, and eventually to their ability to explain their actions in court.

Too often guards' motivations are reduced to a love of violence or antisemitism. Both certainly contributed in some cases, but the vast majority of employees chose violence to accomplish their duties. As we have already seen, they were poorly trained to do so. This does not diminish their personal responsibility for their actions or excuse them, rather it complicates a preconceived notion of the *Aufseherinnen* and their work.

Acclimating to Violence

Because the official manuals and training focused on management and order and because there is no evidence of a practically applicable system of punishment that directed women toward a set procedure of discipline following a specific violation, it is easy to forget that *Aufseherinnen* also learned to slap, hit, beat, and shoot prisoners, but they learned it on the job. This resulted in great inconsistency between camps and between guards in camps. New guards were expected to learn by watching those around them, and so their own behavior was largely influenced by the environment in which they worked and by the behavior of their colleagues.

Nevertheless, while violence is not explicitly mentioned, the space for it is provided. In this system violence became a norm, so expected that mention of it might seem unnecessary. Order was to be kept, and so long as punishments were executed in an orderly fashion, officials were satisfied. *Aufseherinnen* saw other *Aufseherinnen* hit, slap, and beat prisoners for a variety

⁷³ Brown, *The Camp Women*, 238, 241-242.

of reasons, ranging from rule infractions to personal expressions of violence. In this way officials allowed a culture of violence to grow organically. It was enough to lay out the philosophy established at Dachau that guards were to be hard and see their position as that of a soldier and the camps as a battleground. This created the space for the needed violence to occur without updating their set code. It was most important to officials that employees learned to keep order, but just how they did that was left up to them.

This freedom placed the pressure of decision-making on the individual *Aufseherin*. The lack of structure forced women to decide both the appropriate punishment and when one was warranted. Perhaps this was simple decision-making, but it was a skill unfamiliar to many young women of their demographic. Not only was the management of people new to these women, so was the possible recourse to violence. Survivors leave us with many accounts of unprovoked violence- Is it possible that these women reacted with excess and unwarranted violence in part because they were ill-prepared decision-makers and under-trained employees?

Violence and punishment feature in the chapters that follow. The very element of an *Aufseherin's* job that was least a part of training was the very thing that condemned many of them when put on trial. Brutality became a skill set acquired and passed on by watching and doing. Some women excelled at administering punishment and the decision-making process that accompanied it. These were often the women who were promoted, and became the leaders who trained new recruits and helped manage the camp.

Opportunities for Promotion

For many, an advancement was a welcome opportunity that afforded increased authority and options for better supervising assignments. As in many workplaces, advancement was

achieved by demonstrating skill in fulfilling the demands of the job; in this case, adherence to the regulations of the camp and its guiding philosophy of order and severity, and the ability to manage large groups of people. Also, as in other workplaces, it was essential to be noticed by one's superiors to secure such a promotion. For example, this applied to Dorothea Binz, Maria Mandel, and Irma Grese. All three began as entry-level *Aufseherinnen* and all three moved through the ranks to positions of greater responsibility and notoriety. Moreover, they were successful in maintaining their new positions. Once in a position of authority, their responsibilities increased. Listed below are the duties assigned to the *Oberaufseherin* as outlined in the book of camp guidelines, *Lagerordnung*.

1. The *Oberaufseherin* is accountable to the *Schutzhaftlagerführer*. She advises him in all matters related to women and supports and guides him within her area of responsibility. The cooperation of the camp leader and the *Oberaufseherin* should be purely good. The *Oberaufseherin* must be strict, just and prudent.
2. The *Oberaufseherin* reports the daily message to employees and prisoners and gives these to the Camp leader before the beginning of the work day.
3. Each day she must report the food supply from her employees and the prisoners to the administration. She gives a second copy to the kitchen.
4. The *Oberaufseherin* holds the daily early *appell* of the *Aufseherinnen* and communicates new orders and regulations. Important orders are to be repeated once a month.
5. The *Oberaufseherin* checks the barracks of the *Aufseherinnen* for cleanliness and order. She supervises and cares for the female personnel to maintain adherence to the house rules and brings previous experience to the reputation of the *Aufseherinnen* and reports camp infractions to the camp director.
6. The *Oberaufseherin* instructs the *blockaltesten* in their jobs and responsibilities.
7. Together with the camp leader, the *Oberaufseherin* sets the orders for the daily prisoner work commandos. On occasion she controls the work of the external commandos. She submits written complaints to the camp leader. She also checks the blocks daily for cleanliness and correct making of beds.
8. The *Oberaufseherin* imposes punishments on prisoners and communicates this knowledge to ensure that the punishment is carried out immediately. Through consultation with the camp leader, the *Oberaufseherin* instructs the *blockaltesten* on prisoner work. She prepares a short written report to the camp leader for the evaluation of prisoners.

9. The *Oberaufseherin* reports illness of *Aufseherinnen* to the camp leader immediately and notifies the local doctor. Unexcused absences of *Aufseherinnen* must be immediately reported to the camp leader.⁷⁴

These managerial duties were split into three distinct categories: dealing with prisoners, dealing with *Aufseherinnen*, and dealing with the higher camp administration. Thus, *Oberaufseherin* was responsible for instructing the block leaders, setting the work orders for prisoners, checking the cleanliness of barracks and deciding punishments- all of which required active involvement in the prisoners' daily lives.⁷⁵ Therefore, the *Oberaufseherin* was hardly a distant manager sequestered within camp headquarters. This might also explain why so many prisoners were able to identify women who served in these positions. Unlike their male counterparts, the *Oberaufseherinnen* were well-known to prisoners and saw them frequently.

In addition to their work with prisoners, the *Oberaufseherinnen* were required to hold daily staff meetings in order to communicate new policies and procedures. They inspected the living quarters of their subordinates and were responsible for their conduct and their reputation. Lastly, they reported to the higher camp leadership, whom they provided with both oral and written reports on prisoners' performance, *Aufseherinnen* infractions of cleanliness, behavior, and unexcused absences, and the status of the food supply. In short, these women were responsible for a great deal.

Success as an *Oberaufseherin* required a diverse set of skills. In addition to being comfortable with violence, it also demanded a comprehensive understanding of the camp as a place of work, the ability to manage both prisoners and guards, solid organizational skills, communication abilities and, perhaps most difficult, a talent for working with the male

⁷⁴ *Lagerordnung*, KL Ravensbrück, 1940.

⁷⁵ Block leaders were prisoners selected by the administration to maintain order and discipline among their fellow prisoners. They were in a privileged position and obtained better food rations. They often exercised power and punishment over the prisoners in their charge.

leadership. The first requirement in the list above makes this point. It indicates clearly that the *Oberaufseherin* reported to the camp leader and did not have the final say within the women's camp. It also signifies that they were expected to "support" and "guide" the camp leader in matters related to women- word choices that evoke womanly support rather than military assistance. This speaks to a certain difficulty in identifying these women. They were female civilians assisting in a military operation. It is the only duty listed that uses gendered language. It also emphasizes that this relationship be one of good cooperation, which in reality was often missing. Despite its inclusion in their official duties, a smooth relationship with higher camp leadership was often absent in practice. As the following chapter will show, one of the greatest challenges of the workplace was the contentious relationship between the male leadership and the female guards. This first statement makes another important point, it defines the character of a head overseer- she must be strict, just, and prudent. These are standard qualities for a leader, but ones we might not naturally associate with perpetrators of the Holocaust.

Those who were promoted to and maintained these positions needed to understand the workings of the camp on a broad scale. It was not enough to only do the job well, but like many managers also be able to see how various positions functioned within the whole. For example Dorothea Binz displayed this ability during her time as *Oberaufseherin*, demonstrating a keen understanding of Ravensbrück and its evolution over time. For her part, Maria Mandel also displayed an aptitude for managing even under the difficult circumstances of Auschwitz-Birkenau, circumstances that had led to the dismissal of her predecessor, Johanna Langefeld.

While punishment was only a part of the job description, it was an important duty and one that gained guard's a reputation. Such was the case with Irma Grese, who, despite her youth, quickly advanced to a position of *Oberaufseherin* because she was effective at her job. She was

also recognized by SS officials for her severity and dedication.⁷⁶ Women were recognized for promotion for a variety of qualities, ranging from good management skills to brutality. Both were part of the system and needed for the job. The possibility of working indoors with skilled laborers, rather than supervising a work detail in often-harsh weather conditions, was a very good reason to seek advancement.

This list of the *Oberaufseherin* responsibilities also provides a better understanding of what life was like for regular *Aufseherinnen*. Much like active military service, no time was fully off-duty. Even in the SS quarters women were expected to keep orderly, neat barracks, and to behave in a way that upheld the reputation of their position. They could be reprimanded for violations of these expectations, or for unexcused absences. Missing work for illness was allowed, but as with most forms of employment the supervisor had to be notified and approve. Every work day began with an assembly of the guard staff, where the women would listen to their leader's instructions before beginning their duties. Life in the camp was regimented and orderly; each guard fit within this system.

Conclusion

Hildegard Krüger, the postal worker with whom this chapter began, leaves behind a paper trail spanning only a few months. By January 12, 1945, she completed the process she began in August, and was transferred to service in Flossenbürg. Her last form bears the signature "Hildegard Krüger-*Aufseherin*." Like so many other women, we cannot know the exact reasons that prompted Krüger to join the SS *Aufseherinnen*. Nor do we know what happened to her during the course of her service and after the war. In this way, Krüger represents the vast

⁷⁶ Brown, *The Beautiful Beast*, 51-52.

majority of women who served as guards in the camp system. These women quietly filled the ranks of the *SS Aufseherinnen* as unobtrusively as they would any other menial occupation available to them. For a minority like Binz, Mandel and Grese, this work gave them a space to utilize their natural talents in ways not afforded in civilian life. They rose through the ranks to become supervisors in a complicated workplace.

Documenting the process of application, induction, and training establishes the procedure by which women became *Aufseherinnen*. The methods of recruitment show that state officials were not looking for women with particular skills, but rather that they drew from a broad pool of applicants. The physical and written exams indicate that health and literacy were important, and passing a police background check essential. The process of training was intended to prepare women for the rest of their time in guard service. Much had to be accomplished during this training; basic management and guarding skills taught, familiarity with camp rules and regulations, and a shift in view of self from civilian to military auxiliary. While training did some of this successfully, there was a great deal more about their job that it did not teach them and they had to learn after some time in employment. The stakes were very high and prisoners suffered as these women learned the ropes of their new work and improvised as needed.

Most disastrously, training did not adequately prepare women to uniformly employ violence, nor did it prepare them for the decision-making process required in assigning such punishments. Though manuals focused much attention on problems of transport, they offered nothing on conducting *appell*- in practice the most problematic aspect of management. Training stressed the importance of maintaining order and enforcing camp regulations, but offered no guidance in communicating camp rules to a multilingual prisoner population. And finally it did not prepare them for the challenges of overcrowding and disease that most camps eventually

faced. Lack of attention to these details and the failure to adapt training materials to the proven challenges of the workplace meant that many employees were ill-prepared for the work before them. As later chapters will show, male officials paid insufficient attention to these women and their efforts within the camp, setting them up to struggle and invent methods as they went along.

Their training was aimed at preparing these women for a specific job- guarding prisoners within the camp system of the early days, not participating in the Final Solution. It was not aimed at thorough ideological instruction to create a lifelong sisterhood or committed Nazis. Men selected for the SS were not simply admitted to a job, but rather to an elite order charged with many responsibilities and granted many privileges. Men of the SS were trained for life, women for a single job intended to expire when the war ended. This basic difference is key to understanding the attitude of the SS and how they regarded their female “colleagues” and most importantly, how the *Aufseherinnen* fit into the overall camp system.

CHAPTER TWO

Die Dienstzeit: The Workplace

The sun rose early over Birkenau. At four a.m., Elizabeth Volkenrath made her way through a muddy maze of barracks to arrive with her fellow *Aufseherinnen* for morning assembly. The 26 year-old former hairdresser listened as Maria Mandel, the *Oberaufseherin*, communicated the daily announcements and reminded the staff of important procedures. As Volkenrath waited, her mind turned over the coming parts of her day; next came the always frustrating process of *appell* where the moving mass of often-collapsing prisoners made counting difficult; after that it was on to her work detail in the parcel store supervising 30 prisoners who sorted packages and distributed bread rations. It was a decent work assignment, indoors, with a small crew, yet the presence of bread meant there would be stealing to thwart and reprimand. After that 11-hour shift ended, evening *appell* would begin. Hopefully, it would go smoothly and not drag on into the night as it sometimes did. Four a.m. would arrive all too quickly tomorrow morning.⁷⁷

This chapter looks specifically at the camp as a workplace, the work of the SS *Aufseherinnen*, the challenges of their job, and the role of gender in their camp service. It does so by examining the experiences of numerous *Aufseherinnen*. Though many of those mentioned served throughout the camp system, there is more focus on Ravensbrück, Bergen-Belsen, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Auschwitz complex was the largest in the camp system. If we compare the concentration camp system to a corporation, then Auschwitz was by far the most productive branch, the flagship enterprise of the Nazi system. As such it holds special importance in the perpetration of the Holocaust and in the cultural memory surrounding the event.

⁷⁷ PRO, WO 235/15, p. 24-26.

Background on Birkenau: Workplace History

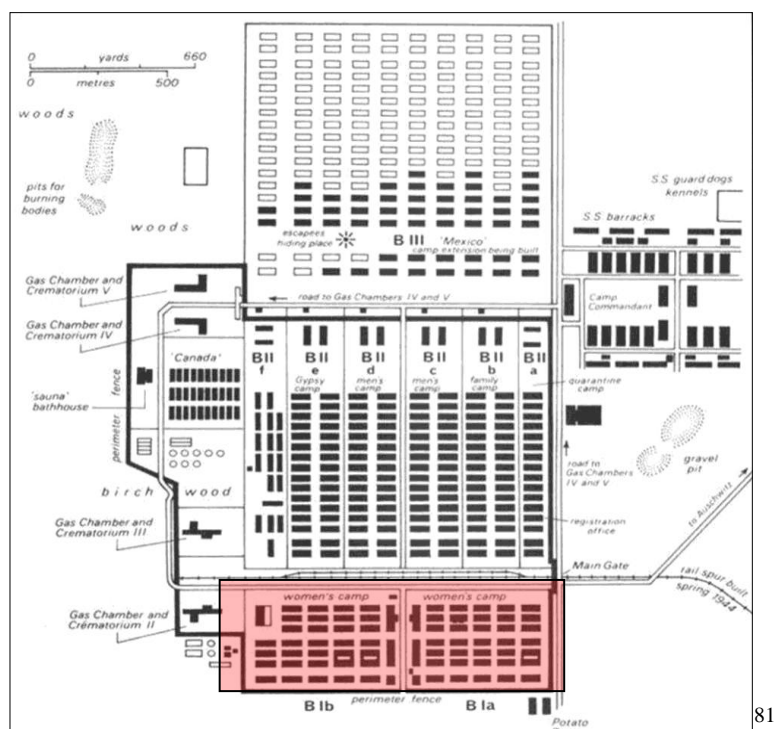
In January 1942 the Final Solution was ratified at the Wannsee Conference, thereby beginning the official policy to murder all of Europe's Jews. Within weeks of this meeting, trains carrying thousands of Jews from across Europe headed for the six death camps recently established in the Eastern territory.⁷⁸ Of these six locations, Auschwitz was unique. All others were primarily killing stations and did not include work camp and slave labor components. The selection process was minimal, as almost everyone sent to the five other camps was killed immediately. The Auschwitz complex included three main facilities: Auschwitz I, the Polish and Soviet prisoner of war camp; Auschwitz II, better known as Birkenau, the death camp; and Auschwitz III, Buna Monowitz, the slave labor camp. Though Auschwitz I was established in May of 1940, it was not until 1942, with the construction of Birkenau, that Auschwitz took the form that we recognize.

These first two years were important in establishing the military culture of the camp. During this time the camp was filled with POWs and staffed entirely by men. The first commandant, Rudolf Höss, was a veteran of the First World War, a member of the paramilitary *Freikorps*, a member of the Nazi party since 1922, and a member of the SS since 1934. Höss was a military man and ran his camp accordingly. The camp he worked to establish became the largest in the Nazi system. And although it processed over a million civilians, at its core it was a military establishment.

The ratification of the Final Solution meant that Auschwitz would no longer be a destination of male POWs and local Poles, but would now include male and female civilians. Due to the war and an overall shortage of manpower, female camp populations were to be guarded by female overseers. As the camp system expanded, more women filtered into the

⁷⁸ Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanak, Sobibor, Treblinka, and Auschwitz-Birkenau.

system. The decision to open a women's camp in Auschwitz was initially driven by a need to alleviate the overcrowding of Ravensbrück. This new prisoner workforce was employed in a variety of tasks, such as agricultural work, which freed up male prisoners to expand the camp and meet the needs of the German armament industry.⁷⁹ In the spring of 1942 women were introduced to Auschwitz and Auschwitz struggled with this cultural shift.⁸⁰



The women's camp at Auschwitz was constructed in Birkenau in August of 1942, in the area shown in pink above. Until that time, the original female prisoners were housed in a separate section of the main camp. The Birkenau sector was originally built to house 20,000 but at its peak contained 30,000 prisoners. Though the prisoner population grew rapidly, the female guard staff never exceeded 71.⁸² The male staff would peak at 4,481 to guard approximately 70,000 male prisoners. So although women prisoners made up roughly 30 percent of the total

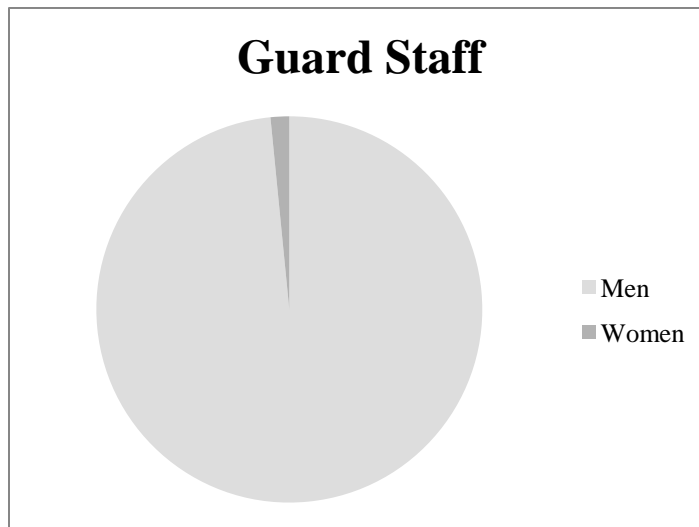
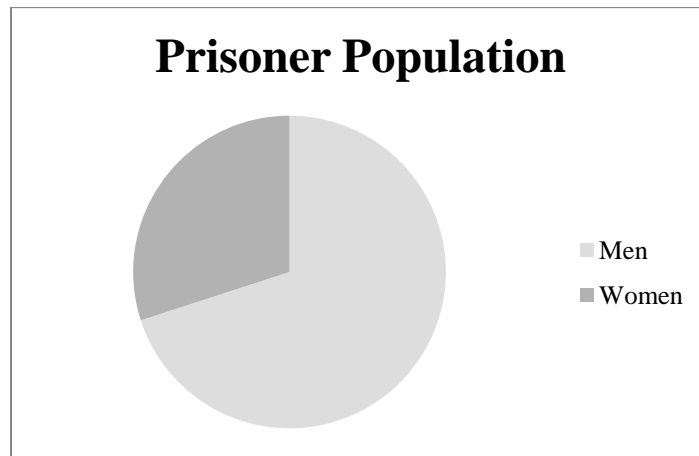
⁷⁹ Szmaglewska, Dymy nad Birkenau, *Auschwitz 1940-1945*, 172.

⁸⁰ Map of Birkenau

⁸¹ <http://www.phdn.org/archives/holocaust-info.dk/auschwitz/map.htm>

⁸² *Auschwitz 1940-1945*, 172-175.

Birkenau population, the female guard staff comprised less than 1 percent of the overall guard staff.



The initial transport of women prisoners included 999 German, non-Jewish, women from Ravensbrück and 999 Slovakian women. The German women were intended to aid in establishing the new camp and supervising fellow prisoners. Two days after the transport from Ravensbrück, 798 women arrived from Bratislava. Within five months the population would grow to 17,000. The guard staff assigned to these first transports of women came from Ravensbrück, where they had trained and previously served. Until July the camp was officially under the jurisdiction of Ravensbrück rather than that of Auschwitz. At that point it came under

the purview of the Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss, where it remained until November 1943. Following the official subdivision of Auschwitz into its three main camps, the women's camp was administered by the overall Auschwitz commandant through the commandant of Birkenau. Though final authority always rested with these men, at all times there was a female director of the women's camp who was charged with maintaining a good working relationship with the male leader. The first *Oberaufseherin* was Johanna Langefeld, who oversaw the journey from Ravensbrück, arrival in Auschwitz, and the first few months of the new camp in Birkenau. After October 1942, she was relieved of her duties and replaced by Maria Mandel.⁸³

The conditions the *Aufseherinnen* encountered upon arrival were different from those they were accustomed to in Ravensbrück. Though Ravensbrück experienced some initial overcrowding, the population problems they encountered in Auschwitz were much worse. Ravensbrück was an established camp, fully constructed and organized. In their initial months in the main camp at Auschwitz, prisoners and guards faced the difficulty of working in a makeshift space constructed by separating ten blocks from the men's barracks by a concrete wall. The ever-growing population of inmates forced the transfer of the women's camp to Birkenau just as its hasty construction was being completed. Here female prisoners occupied 30 barracks, 15 of the wooden stable design found in the men's camp and 15 made of brick. This included the area shown on the map above labeled as BIa. In the following year the women's sector was expanded to include BIb, an area previously occupied by men. These areas of Birkenau functioned as the *Frauen Konzentrationslager*, though at various stages additional women were temporarily housed in other sectors of the camp, but always segregated from male prisoners. This scattering of prisoners augmented the problems of understaffing.

⁸³ Szmaglewska, Dymy nad Birkenau, *Auschwitz 1940-1945*, 176-177.

The camp was hurriedly and poorly constructed, making the living and working conditions difficult. One survivor described the early days of Birkenau by writing:

In the summer of 1942, Birkenau was a muddy field surrounded by an electrified fence. There were no roads, no sidewalks between the blocks. In the depths of these dark dens, in bunks like multi-storied cages, the feeble light of a candle burning here or there flickered over naked, emaciated figure curled up, blue from the cold, bent over a pile of filthy rags, holding their shaved heads in their hands, picking out an insect with their scraggly fingers and smashing it on the edge of the bunk- that is what the barracks looked like in 1942.⁸⁴

The Auschwitz complex is usually thought of in its finished form of organized efficiency, but the description above speaks to its period of becoming, when it was messy and still under construction. The fact that it did not always exist in the form that it is most famously remembered for is key to understanding the development of the system and of the work environment of both prisoner and guard. In these months, the camp suffered from a lack of water, unbearable sanitary conditions, contagious disease, and a very high mortality rate. In 1942, 28,000 female prisoners were brought to the camp; by the year's end only 5,400 remained alive. The following year claimed an even higher death toll at 31,500 with 9,000 deaths in December alone.⁸⁵ These conditions were only addressed when typhus began to infect the SS guard staff. Though disease and high mortality affected all areas of the camp, conditions in the Frauen KZ were considerably worse. They were also much worse than those the *Aufseherinnen* had previously experienced in Ravensbrück.

Commandant Rudolf Höss attributed the poor conditions of the women's camp to the mismanagement of the women overseers, particularly its first *Oberaufseherin*, Johanna Langefeld, rather than to the difficulty of the project or to the conditions established by the nature of the system. He charged that she was incapable of coping with the situation, or of

⁸⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 185.

accepting suggestions for its improvement. By Höss' own admission there were conflicts of administration between himself and Langefeld. The growing discord led him to appeal to the visiting *Reichführer* in 1942 to have Langefeld removed from her duties. Höss did not push for her replacement by another woman, but for her position to go to a male officer. Though his request was denied, a male officer was assigned to Langefeld as her assistant. Against this degrading measure, Höss complained, "Which of my men would be willing to take his orders from a woman?"⁸⁶ All who were placed in this post immediately requested release. Höss later devised a parallel chain of staff for the women's camp, so that every important position held by a woman had a male equivalent.⁸⁷ Though Langefeld was soon replaced as head overseer by Maria Mandel, this early power struggle highlights tensions between the two guard staffs and Höss' dislike for his female employees.

In addition to the evolving camp structure and deplorable sanitary conditions, *Aufseherinnen* in Birkenau faced an acute gender gap. Ravensbrück was a camp staffed and populated primarily by women. In Auschwitz, men held the majority of guard positions and there was a significant population of male prisoners. In this environment the position of *Aufseherinnen* as a minority of the SS workforce was intensely apparent. Initial ratios were 2,000 SS men to ten SS women. Over the course of its history, Auschwitz employed 6,800 SS men and only 200 SS women.⁸⁸ Though women accounted for one third of the camp population, their guard staff never reflected it.

Figures such as these are more than a numeric detail; they demonstrate that these women were grossly outnumbered by their male colleagues. Nevertheless, their minimal presence was

⁸⁶ Szmaglewska, Dymy nad Birkenau, *Auschwitz 1940-1945*, 62.

⁸⁷ Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum, eds., *Anatomy of the Death Camp Auschwitz* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 395-396.

⁸⁸ Gutman and Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, 274.

perceived as an insult and a disruption to the male, military culture that characterized their place of employment. For many men, particularly those in positions of power such as Höss, an appointment in Auschwitz was a mark of achievement. Simply by their arrival at this workplace, *Aufseherinnen* lessened the prestige of the posting. Höss resented their placement in positions of power and deemed their job performance unsatisfactory. This lack of support from the top management created greater difficulties in the workplace of Auschwitz. Not only was this handful of women charged with creating order out of an impossible situation that required guarding thousands of prisoners, but they lacked the confidence and support of their superiors. Höss assessed these women workers as lazy, spoiled, and unreliable. He found them under-qualified and overpaid.⁸⁹ These women, who did not appear to him to take their duties seriously, had no business in his camp.⁹⁰ If we again employ a business model, it is easy to compare the Nazi high command to executives at corporate headquarters. They instituted the policy of adding women to the force in order to free up men for more important work, but they did not consider how this might be received by those working in the field.

Atmosphere of Arrival

This same attitude of unwelcome was expressed by ordinary SS men even during their leisure time. Shortly after the arrival of the women and their *Aufseherinnen*, Tadeusz Rybacki, a Polish survivor, who served as a waiter in Auschwitz I recalls one night in the SS dining room:

There was singing, drinking, slapping on the back, and all kinds of alcohol. I poured wine in their glasses and there was one SS woman, who when I poured her wine, started pulling my arm. She said to me, “Darling...”, and everyone started looking at me. The

⁸⁹ Rudolf Höss, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, 61.

⁹⁰ Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS*, (Oswiecim: Poland, 2006), 63.

situation for me was very dangerous and I almost spilt the wine, but luckily some SS man yelled at her, “Shut your mouth, you whore!” and she let go.⁹¹

Perhaps the *Aufseherin*, a little tipsy, meant to flirt with the waiter, as she might have done in civilian life. Perhaps she did not realize (or remember) that waiters there were prisoners, not the social equals of the village girls the *Aufseherinnen* had been only a short time ago. But in any case, the SS man’s reaction was telling of the *Aufseherin*’s inferior status. He felt free to berate her publicly for her violation in camp discipline and for behaving in a “forward,” unwomanly manner, using an explicitly gendered term of abuse. His disrespectful treatment demonstrates that he did not consider her to be either a fellow military officer or a lady. For Rybacki, however, the *Aufseherin* remained an officer, empowered to demand from him compliance even with forbidden orders. The SS man countermanded her implied instructions to Rybacki, putting her, rather than him, in the wrong.

The same prisoner waiter claimed that later that night an *Aufseherin* made sexual advances toward him and other waiters. “Some drunk, big woman was walking and swaying, going most probably to the toilet, and she saw us standing and she started making gestures to us suggestive of sexual intercourse. Our faces were stonelike and we were whispering to one another, ‘what does she want, that bitch?’”⁹² His reaction is one of disgust and annoyance, and perhaps caution, but the feeling of fear is strikingly absent. No female prisoner would have reacted in such a manner if faced with similar attention from a male guard. Unlike the previous incident, which happened in the company of SS men, Rybacki does not consider this situation dangerous.

Given this disadvantage, and the desire to prove themselves to their male colleagues, it is not surprising that these women felt pressure to conform to the male code of behavior that

⁹¹ Laurence Rees, *Auschwitz* (London: Public Affairs, 2006), 105.

⁹² *Ibid.*

permeated the camp, a military code that valued discipline and punishment, and decried weakness.⁹³ Numerous survivor accounts note the changed behavior of women guards in the presence of their male colleagues.

Challenges of the Workplace

Though one of the most enduring conceptions of the Nazi concentration camp is that of a highly organized, orderly state, a closer examination reveals a system that was much better at regimented death than regimented life. The system that handled millions became proficient in killing, yet remained inefficient at managing those it did not immediately murder. This presented *Aufseherinnen* with a number of workplace challenges including: *appell*, food production and scarcity, language barriers, frequent changes in assignment, and adaptations to the evolving camp system. And underlying it all was an acrimonious relationship with their male colleagues.

One of the most problematic aspects of the *Aufseherinnen*'s routine was the process of *appell*. Their day began early with the 4 a.m. roll call. While prisoners used the latrines, washed themselves, and organized their quarters, the *Aufseherinnen* were called by the *Oberaufseherin* to their own roll call. Here the orders of the day were communicated to the group and reminders of important protocols were issued.⁹⁴ Once the *appell* of personnel was completed, the guards arrived at the site of the prisoner *appell*, already underway. Upon arriving, the guards expected to find prisoners, having finished their morning rations of bread and coffee, and lined up according

⁹³ Conformity to gender norms of contemporary masculinity has been used to explain the participation of men in killing operations on the Eastern Front, see Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*. While these perpetrators cite the desire to appear "manly" to their comrades as a reason for participating in the killing, the SS women actively reject the norms of their gender for the same reasons- to conform to a masculine ideal.

⁹⁴ *SS Disziplinarstraf und Beschwerdeordnung*, Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter-Partei Schutzstaffel, Berlin, 1943, 104.

to block, in rows of ten where they awaited counting.⁹⁵ Depending on the day and the SS officer in charge, *appell* could go very quickly or last for hours. Since *appell* in the women's camp always took longer than that of the men's camp the process began 30 minutes earlier. Evening *appell* was often the worst, and if prisoners were missing it could last into the night. It was during evening *appell* that prisoners were publicly punished or executed. Inspections of the sick and selection for death might also be made during this time. Finally, following these activities, came the distribution of the daily bread ration, another moment of potential chaos, as starving prisoners fought to receive and hold on to their allotment of bread.⁹⁶

The conditions of roll call in the women's camp were challenging for the guards and consequently filled with chaos and violence for the prisoners. At such moments, it is important to remember that the total number of female prisoners averaged at 30,000, while the female guard staff never exceeded 71, nor were all 71 women on duty at the same time. All of Birkenau suffered from overcrowding and understaffing, yet the latter was particularly serious in the women's camp. Any *appell* could potentially last for hours, causing prisoners to frequently collapse from exhaustion and often drown in the mud. The confusion of women's *appell* was well-known within the camp and by the camp administration. Yet other than requiring the women's *appell* to begin earlier, the camp administration made no noticeable effort to improve conditions for the *Aufseherinnen* or give them the tools to succeed at their job. According to prisoners and Auschwitz administration alike, the twice daily *appell* was a major source of difficulty and violence.

⁹⁵ Szmaglewska, Dymy nad Birkenau, *Auschwitz 1940-1945*, 66.

⁹⁶ Prisoners received about a third of a kilogram, sometimes some cheese and poor quality sausage. The bread ration was intended to be partially saved for breakfast as well, though the portions were hardly sufficient for one meal let alone two. Szmaglewska, Dymy nad Birkenau, *Auschwitz 1940-1945* 69.

One survivor, Helen Tichauer, noted a lack of organization and managerial skills among the *Aufseherinnen* during this process. Tichauer was among the first transports to Auschwitz in 1942 and remained there until she was evacuated in January of 1945 just prior to the camp's liberation. The length of her time in Auschwitz speaks to her privileged position within the camp.⁹⁷ As such she was able to make long-term observations of its structure and its employees. She describes the first days and the change over time as follows:

...there was terrible chaos. Those SS women who then were in charge of conducting the *lager*...the report leader who at the beginning did not know at all what to do... She had the people lined up, and as soon as they attempted to re-count us the number was never the same, because the prisoners in part did not know... People ran from one group to the other... So that the first days it was totally impossible to arrange a correct *appell*... Over the course of time the prisoners, too learned how to line up. The report leader also learned how to count correctly.⁹⁸

Tichauer stated that if done properly *appells* could take as little as ten minutes, but during the first years they could go on for four hours. Overwhelmed and confused, the guards became more abusive and violent when the numbers did not add up. According to Tichauer, the real change came when the *Aufseherinnen* learned to appoint more competent prisoner assistants. The most effective assistants had the skills of a good clerk; they could figure, read, and write. The needed skills the SS lacked were not brute force and violence, but the ability to organize and report, and for these they looked to prisoners. Tichauer further elaborates on roll call problems and her role in improving the routine:

As you know, the roll call in a military environment is very important, but in a concentration camp the roll call was everything. The SS guards in charge of that did not know how to count from one to five. They were very primitive people. They needed the inmates to help them to count and annotate certain things, basically to do their jobs. There was no system, and it was very hard to conduct the roll call. People were very restless, they did not know how to behave. They were asked to stand in rows of five, but

⁹⁷ Average survival time in Auschwitz-Birkenau was two to three months. Only prisoners with better jobs and connections could survive long term.

⁹⁸ Jürgen Matthäus *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 134.

they constantly shifted. They could not be counted, and it took hours and hours. My friend asked me if I could help her design forms for this. I always liked systems, and to be efficient... By cutting down the roll call time from four hours to forty minutes you saved lives... So I helped design a little system that was suitable.⁹⁹

Perhaps most remarkable from both of Tichauer's descriptions, one given in 1946, the second collected in 2000, is her ability to diagnose, and ultimately help correct, the situation. She saw the confusion of both the prisoners and of the guards, an observation few were capable of making. Clearly in need of help, *Aufseherinnen* turned to their prisoners for assistance. The prisoners recognized this could save lives, and agreed. Like Tichauer, many prisoners had education and managerial skills superior to that of their overseers. The *Aufseherinnen* recognized this and used it to their advantage to meet the needs of their job.

The shortcomings of the *Aufseherinnen* were also noticed by the camp administration. However, though their weaknesses were noted, there was no attempt to aid them, to improve their job performance, or to make the camp operations run more smoothly. Rudolf Höss addresses the problem of *appell*:

Hardly a day passed without discrepancies appearing in the numbers of inmates shown on the strength-return. The supervisors ran hither and thither in all this confusion like a lot of flustered hens, and had no idea what to do. The three or four good ones among them were driven crazy by the rest... Obviously they did not take their work or duties very seriously and most of them were inefficient as well.¹⁰⁰

This passage demonstrates the administration's awareness of the problems in the women's camp. Like Tichauer, Höss described a lack of order, however his imagery of the *Aufseherinnen* as "flustered hens" is loaded with gendered stereotypes. It is one of many ways that he expressed his disdain for the women employed in his camp. Höss' statement also includes the assumption that their shortcomings were due partly to their not caring about their job.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 106.

¹⁰⁰ Szmaglewska, Dymy nad Birkenau, *Auschwitz 1940-1945*, 62-63.

It is indisputable that initially the *Aufseherinnen* struggled with some of their duties; however, accounts like Tichauer's show that through the increased use of prisoner functionaries, women devised strategies to accommodate their own weaknesses in order to improve their performance. This adaptation was lost on the male administrators. Despite their improvement, Höss remained convinced that these women would rather return to Ravensbrück where the work was lighter and more suited to their abilities. When confronted by *Aufseherinnen* about the poor conditions and difficulties of their job, Höss' only solution was to hope the war ended soon.¹⁰¹ He and the administration did not believe the situation was fixable, thus, they did not attempt to give the *Aufseherinnen* the tools to succeed. Women had better luck turning to prisoners for assistance than to their male colleagues and superiors. As would be the case in later decades in numerous fields, the introduction of women into dominantly male occupations was greeted with skepticism and often hostility. This phenomenon, while not surprising in other times and places, is important to consider within the context of the Nazi enterprise to murder all of Europe's Jews. It shows that even though the priority was to execute the Final Solution smoothly and to maintain order within the camp system, that goal was not so important that it suppressed the typical and very ordinary response by men to an influx of women into a field where they were thought not to belong. Destruction of a common enemy might be thought the most important goal; however, the unwelcome and continued unequal treatment of Auschwitz's women guard staff suggests otherwise. Their force was less than united.

Though violence during *appell* could be entirely arbitrary, some prisoners noted that their exhausted condition sometimes made it difficult for them to be counted, which elicited abuse from the SS. Herein lies one of the cyclical problems of the camp system. Camp conditions were

¹⁰¹ Rudolf Höss, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, 61.

created by the SS to neglect and destroy prisoners, yet these same conditions made the work of the SS considerably more difficult, resulting in even worse conditions and treatment of prisoners.

Each *Aufseherin* was given a work assignment. Some *Aufseherinnen* typed up reports of the information gathered during *appell*, which was to be sent to the camp administration. Others remained within the camp to inspect prisoner barracks for cleanliness. Despite the deplorable conditions that existed within the camps, cleanliness was an often repeated priority of the guards.¹⁰² Some prisoners worked within the camp, in the parcel store, sewing uniforms, in the laundry, and in the kitchen, while others were escorted outside the camp for *Auserkommando* duty where they dug ditches, drained ponds, or gardened.¹⁰³ Much of the violence in the camp occurred during these work details. In 1942 the WVHA (*Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt*) fixed the minimum work day in all concentration camps at eleven hours, though this could be lengthened in summer and shortened in winter.¹⁰⁴ Such regulations meant long hours for both prisoners and staff. Though prisoners were obviously worse off in suffering lengthy shifts in all weather conditions, guards too endured long hours and poor conditions. Such conditions contributed to the excessive use of violence among the guard staff and their seemingly disproportionate responses to minor infractions.

In some areas of their work, such as *appell*, *Aufseherinnen* worked exclusively with other women; in other areas of their daily routine they worked with their male colleagues. Work details, especially those outside the camp, often involved both female overseers and male guards. Given their inferior position within the camp and the lack of respect they received from their male colleagues, it is not surprising that these women felt pressure to conform to the male code

¹⁰² PRO, WO 234/15, 210.

¹⁰³ Szmaglewska, Dymy nad Birkenau, *Auschwitz 1940-1945*, 68.

¹⁰⁴ Main SS Economic and Administrative Department, responsible for overseeing concentration camp system and business and finance projects for the SS. Szmaglewska, Dymy nad Birkenau, *Auschwitz 1940-1945*, 67.

of behavior that ran the camp. It also helps explain the many survivor accounts that note that the behavior of women guards changed in the presence of their male colleagues.

Auschwitz survivor Dora Szafran testified that guard Juana Bormann was often seen with a large black dog that she would occasionally use to set upon prisoners. Szafran told about one such event that involved a woman with a swollen leg who could not keep up with the work detail as they returned to camp, “At first she egged the dog on and it pulled at the woman’s clothes; then she was not satisfied with that and made the dog go for her throat.”¹⁰⁵ Though small in stature and frail in appearance, Bormann proudly pointed to the body and said to an SS man, “It is my work.”¹⁰⁶ Such an incident again demonstrates the relationship between SS men and women. Clearly, Bormann thought her actions would win the approval or respect of her male colleague. Bormann’s eager claim of responsibility makes sense within the previously established attitude of the male leadership toward female guards. Here, her brutality can be read as a means of legitimizing herself, not to prisoners, but to her colleagues.

Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch survivor of Ravensbrück, recalls that whenever men were present on their work details, the women guards took notice and changed their behavior. Ten Boom describes how when she and her sister Betsie were leveling ground inside the camp wall, her sister, old and starving, was unable to lift much dirt, which attracted the attention of the overseer. After the *Aufseherin* yelled at Betsie to move faster and carry more dirt, the guard began to mock her, “‘Look what Madame Baroness is carrying! Surely she will over-exert herself!’ The other guards and even some of the prisoners laughed. Encouraged, the guard threw herself into a parody of Betsie’s faltering walk. A male guard was with our detail today and in

¹⁰⁵ PRO, WO 234/15, p. 84.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

the presence of a man the women guards were always animated.”¹⁰⁷ This scene of ridicule does not seem that cruel until Betsie offends the guard by trying to play along, “That’s me alright, but you’d better let me totter along with my little spoonful, or I’ll have to stop altogether.”¹⁰⁸

Embarrassed by her own game, the guard declares she will be the one who “decides who’s to stop” and hits Betsie on the neck and chest with a leather crop. Ten Boom’s account demonstrates that the *Aufseherinnen* played to their audience of SS men and feared humiliation in their presence.

Bormann was old by camp standards, at 52 she was nearly twice the age of the majority of women auxiliaries. A former orderly in an insane asylum, Bormann joined the SS because it paid ten times that of her previous job. Service as an *Aufseherinnen* took her to Ravensbrück, Birkenau, and finally Bergen-Belsen. While in Birkenau, she worked in a clothing warehouse and as leader of the punishment detail, a change from her early assignment of kitchen work in Ravensbrück. At times during her supervision of prisoners, Bormann hit inmates. Stealing was a common problem in the clothing store, and frequently Bormann reacted with violence when prisoners stole or “when they did not obey orders.”¹⁰⁹ To work in this environment required an acceptance of violence as a means to an end. Bormann understood these actions to be a daily part of her job. In her mind beatings were justified and not excessive. Though as previously shown in chapter one, training in violence was uneven and lacking, leaving *Aufseherinnen* to determine the infraction and the punishment. Bormann also observed that “It was very difficult to control them. Birkenau was a very large camp.”¹¹⁰ Like many *Aufseherinnen* who reflected upon their service,

¹⁰⁷ Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1971), 204.

¹⁰⁸ Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, 204.

¹⁰⁹ PRO, WO 235/15, p. 17-19.

¹¹⁰ PRO, WO 235/15, p. 18.

Bormann was uninterested in comparing her behavior and strategies on the job to other female guards. She did, like many others, believe that “I only wanted to keep order.”¹¹¹

Kitchens

One of the most challenging sites of work in any camp was the kitchen. Those who worked in the kitchens were responsible for a great deal; they had to produce vast quantities of rations with limited resources, they worked long hours, and their supplies were the constant target of theft. Though the lack of food and starvation conditions were frequently described by prisoners, the business of food preparation is less commonly discussed. For the prisoners, much of life focused on acquiring food; for the guards, their duties centered on producing, protecting and distributing rations. Because of their central importance, the kitchens were the site of much activity and much violence. *Aufseherinnen* who worked there described not only the difficulties of their work, but also a desire to accomplish the duties assigned to them to the best of their abilities.

Ilse Forster was a 22 year-old factory worker who, with minimal training and only a few months experience, was put in charge of a kitchen in the men’s compound in Bergen-Belsen. Here, she oversaw 60 women prisoners to ensure that “... the work was done, that there was no stealing, and that the food was well cooked.”¹¹² When Ilse Forster first arrived in Bergen-Belsen in February 1945, kitchen shifts lasted from 3am until 11pm, with only an hour break for lunch. According to Forster, the kitchens were short-staffed and there were not enough *Aufseherinnen* in Belsen. Later, as more arrived, she suggested that the shifts be broken in half so that the first shift worked from 3am until 1pm and the second from 1pm to 11pm. Her suggestion was

¹¹¹ PRO, WO 235/15, p. 19.

¹¹² PRO, WO 234/15, p. 73.

implemented, though this still left women with long working hours. Forster also demonstrated initiative and understanding of her job when she asked for additional rations to be provided to inmates, specifically those who worked in the kitchen. Forster was not motivated by generosity, but rather practicality. She understood that more food would make the inmates easier to handle and by providing extra food to the kitchen staff she thought she could reduce internal theft.¹¹³ This proved partially effective, although kitchen workers continued to steal so that they could barter their stolen food. It was an understandable action, yet one that was the source of frustration for guards.

The larger food shortage problem could not be improved by individual guards despite their best efforts to take countermeasures against theft. Stealing from the food stores was an ongoing problem and one that guards spent a good deal of time addressing, often violently. Many of the women assigned to kitchen guard duty recall beating prisoners on numerous occasions as punishment for stealing potatoes, turnips, and bread. Sometimes the beatings were administered to chase prisoners away, and other times they were caught and then reprimanded.¹¹⁴ The punishments and severity of the beatings varied from guard to guard. Many women used their hands, while others occasionally used sticks. Ilse Forster describes:

I beat them with my hands and sometimes with a stick. I have never had a rubber truncheon. There were heaps of potatoes and turnips in front of the kitchen, and [Herta] Ehlert [another guard] told us that if we did not take more energetic steps to stop this stealing she would talk in a different language to us. I had to see that the vegetables were not stolen because there was a scarcity, and later on the prisoners would not have had anything at all.¹¹⁵

Forster's simple description is rich with the complexity of camp life. She straightforwardly explains her method and reason for using violence. She goes beyond the explanation that stealing

¹¹³ PRO, WO 234/15, p. 73-74.

¹¹⁴ PRO, WO 235/16, p.35.

¹¹⁵ PRO, WO 235/16, p. 34.

was prohibited and cites the overall problem of scarcity of food as a justification. This should not be read as false concern for prisoner well-being in an attempt to appear more compassionate, but rather as an expression of her work ethic and how she defined her job. From her position as kitchen manager, her priority was to provide cooked food to the inmates and theft made this work more difficult. She protected the food stores out of diligence to her job. Ilse Forster also notes that Herta Ehlert was displeased by the amount of stealing and demanded that harsher measures be taken. Ehlert does not specify what should be done, but she made it clear that the current situation was unacceptable. Ilse Forster's statement highlights the position of so many *Aufseherinnen*: their job was not easy, it required a certain amount of force be used, and they felt pressure from those above them to improve their performance.

Like Forster, Anna Hempel also described the challenge of Belsen's kitchens, particularly the shortage of supplies and poor working conditions. The 45 year-old Silesian worked 14-16 hour shifts in kitchen number two. There, she was the only guard charged with the supervision of 34 women and 18 men who produced 17,000 rations per day. Hempel and her crew had access to seven or eight boilers that varied in capacity from 92 to 198 gallons.¹¹⁶ This meant that they had to make three preparations for each meal. The limited supply of water and unpredictable access to electricity due to wartime conditions made work additionally difficult. Hempel told her workers that they "had to make good use of the little light and water we had, otherwise we could not have finished our meals."¹¹⁷ She drove them hard while there was light and water, but reserved beatings for those who stole from the kitchens. Hempel struck one man with a stick when she caught him filling his pockets with turnips. She explained that such action was necessary because of the shortage of supplies.

¹¹⁶ PRO, WO 235/16, p. 39.

¹¹⁷ PRO, WO 235/16, p. 42.

Her kitchen received a varying supply of rations, but it was never sufficient for the thousands they had to feed. Potatoes were irregularly delivered. Turnips came more frequently, but in small amounts. On a good day she received three to four cartloads of turnips amounting to 2,000 to 7,000 pounds, a seemingly sizable amount until divided among 17,000 prisoners. This meant each prisoner would get between a tenth and a fourth of a pound of turnips from each meal. Coffee was also very limited; Hempel's kitchen was allotted between 600-800 pounds of coffee per week, though water shortages usually discouraged its production even when it was in stock.¹¹⁸ Hempel's primary responsibility was to oversee the production of vast quantities of food with limited resources. Seeing her job in this way provides a more complete understanding of her duties and motivations for violent actions.

Another *Aufseherin*, Frieda Walter, described the problem of theft in Belsen's kitchens and her role in curtailing it. She worked in kitchens two and three and noted specifically that she was in charge of what happened inside the kitchen, not outside it, displaying a limited scope of responsibility. Walter admitted to beating those who stole from inside her kitchen but denied ever hitting anyone stealing from outside stores, because "It was not my duty to take care of the people outside the kitchen."¹¹⁹ She says she struck inmates twice, regardless of the number of potatoes stolen. Given that no official guidelines were made to govern such punishment, Walter's decision of two slaps was a personal judgment made by this 23-year-old.¹²⁰ Like many of her colleagues, Walters was German speaker and sometimes found it difficult to understand the Polish women working under her charge. In at least one case her limited language skills

¹¹⁸ PRO, WO 235/16, p. 40.

¹¹⁹ PRO, WO 235/16, p. 34

¹²⁰ PRO, WO 235/16, p. 33.

resulted in her striking a woman who did not understand her instructions issued in German, yet another factor complicating the workplace for prisoners and guards.¹²¹

Irene Haschke, another factory worker who transferred to Belsen in the final days, also recalled improvising forms of punishment. She worked both in the kitchen and in the peeling department, peeling and preparing vegetables for use in the kitchen. Sometimes she worked a single shift and sometimes a double, depending on the day. In this capacity, she saw that a crowd often gathered around the cookhouse and vegetable stores. Haschke noticed that her male superiors who were officially in charge of the kitchens, but not always present, chased away prisoners with a stick. Learning from their example, she too procured a stick from a male guard and used it to chase and beat prisoners away from food stores.¹²² Her example demonstrates that violent techniques were learned and improved upon during the course of employment and in many cases learned from the men with whom they worked.

Kitchen work did not include the baking of bread. Bread was not produced onsite but was purchased from local bakeries, requiring as much as 5,000 loaves each day to meet the meager daily rations of 1/12 of a three pound loaf to each prisoner.¹²³ Camps depended on supplies from outside in order to feed the inmates and guards. This also explains the extreme shortage of bread near the end of the war when supplies were low and transportation almost impossible, due to railway bombings. Bread distribution was another work assignment of the *Aufseherinnen*. Charlotte Klein worked in Bergen-Belsen to supervise the bread *Kommando*. She watched prisoners count the loaves of bread and load them into carts, and then accompanied the distribution to different parts of the camp. The carts held 520 loaves and so distribution required multiple trips throughout the camp. Klein was instructed to deliver the bread to kitchen number

¹²¹ Phillips, *The Trial of Josef Kramer*, 686.

¹²² PRO, WO 235/16, p. 34-41.

¹²³ PRO, WO 235/16, p. 6-9. As a point of comparison the SS were issued 6 slices of bread daily.

three in the women's compound, to the blocks near the camp entrance of the men's compound for internal distribution, and to the SS cookhouse. The bread store and the hand cart were particularly attractive targets for theft, though mostly from prisoners outside her supervision. According to Klein, many prisoners tried to steal bread both from the cart and from the bread store, where the door was left open to keep the bread from molding. Prisoners caught stealing would be slapped or beaten.¹²⁴

Like Forster, Klein believed in giving extra bread rations to her workers to prevent stealing, though unlike Forster, Klein saw that it effectively curbed internal stealing. She also gave additional bread to her fellow *Aufseherinnen* when they requested it for their own prisoners.¹²⁵ Even though starvation was rampant in the final days of Belsen, she continued this practice because she knew there was not enough to go around and so gave it to those she saw working. While she offers a different rationale from that of Ilse Forster on food distribution in the face of shortage, both women acted in ways they considered reasonable. So often the actions of guards are only seen from the perspective of prisoners when they might be harmful or seem random, but they were not behaving in a random way; rather they were attempting to figure out how to meet the requirements of the job.

Klein's tenure in Belsen was not long. She arrived in February of 1944 and was arrested there by the British in April 1945, yet she saw some of the most chaotic and desperate conditions the camp ever experienced. Her four days of training in Ravensbrück and five months of service in smaller camps left her ill-prepared for work in Belsen, where she was one of 40 *Aufseherinnen* charged with overseeing 28,000 women and 500 children.¹²⁶ Still, she managed to execute the duties of her job to the best of her abilities, and did so without the assistance of her male

¹²⁴ PRO, WO 235/16, p. 18-21.

¹²⁵ PRO, WO 235/16, p. 20.

¹²⁶ Phillips, *The Trial of Josef Kramer*, 19-20.

supervisor, who was frequently not present.¹²⁷ She had to be ready to use violence to protect her bread cart, yet issued extra bread to her crew, called them by their names rather than their numbers, and on occasion gave them extra coffee she made herself. Such behavior shows the complexity and variety of individual experience.¹²⁸

Moving around

While some women remained on one work detail for a majority of their time in a particular camp, the experience of many was to be shuffled around as need dictated. They had to be ready to adapt to new work crews and a diverse range of tasks. Gertrud Sauer, a thick-set, middle-aged saleswoman, was conscripted as an *Aufseherin* after her home was bombed and she was forced to begin work in a munitions factory. For the majority of her eight months as an *Aufseherin*, she supervised women in factories, moving a total of three times before her arrival in Belsen. Once there, she worked in the wood *Kommando*, the peeling department, the hospital, kitchen number two, the women's compound, and finally the bathhouse. Her assignment in the bathhouse lasted the longest, and there she supervised the delousing of new arrivals. The bathhouses were moderately heated and so depended on wood from the wood *Kommando*, and if there was no wood, the bathhouse was shut down. During these periods of closure Sauer assisted Gertrud Fiest, another *Aufseherin*, in the women's compound. In order to get there she walked by kitchen number two where she had previously worked. If she saw prisoners stealing from this kitchen she sometimes intervened- beating and chasing them away. It is interesting that Sauer makes a distinction between this kitchen and others in the camp; she does not intervene in kitchens where she has not previously worked. This demonstrates the type of responsibility

¹²⁷ PRO, WO 235/16, p. 6.

¹²⁸ PRO, WO 235/17, p. 32.

Aufseherinnen felt in their duties. It also provides a better sense of workplace violence that occurred. Prisoners often describe guards appearing at random to quickly beat someone and then disappearing without much explanation. As Sauer saw it, she was addressing an infraction in her former site of work on her way to her next assignment.¹²⁹

Hilde Lisiewitz, another *Aufseherin* with a variety of jobs within the camps, was conscripted from factory work to guard duty when she was 23; her background was in food service and gardening. After only a month on the job, she was evacuated to Belsen. Her time there was divided between the wood *Kommando*, the vegetable *Kommando*, vegetable delivery, peeling department in the men's compound, and the bathhouse. Many of the prisoners in her charge were Russian and she relied on their ability to communicate in German since she knew no other language.¹³⁰

Like Gertrud Sauer and Hilde Lisiewitz, Gertrud Fiest was also assigned to a variety of tasks. First, Fiest worked in the garden of Belsen, then the peeling department, the bathhouse, and finally the women's compound. Once in the women's compound she was made responsible for conducting *appell* and for "keeping order and seeing that everything was clean."¹³¹ In the face of such tasks, the 26 year-old admitted that "I lost my patience because they always did what was prohibited." This resulted in violence towards prisoners. Fiest maintained that "I did my duty very conscientiously."¹³² Fiest's words offer interesting insight into the camp behavior of many *Aufseherinnen*, and their attitude toward their work. Expressions of violence are made within the context of infractions to the system. Though we know objectively that she responded with excessive violence, her explanation of lost patience and a desire to do her job well suggest

¹²⁹PRO, WO 235/16, p. 17-23.

¹³⁰PRO, WO 235/16, p. 24-27.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 14.

motivations based in duty, rather than a zeal to use violence. Additionally, the aspiration of cleanliness was one that numerous *Aufseherinnen* described. As such it must have been communicated to them that this was an area of importance, and one that was in constant need of attention.

Promotion and Leadership

There is a noticeable distinction between those *Aufseherinnen* who performed regular duties and those who were in positions of more responsibility. The workplace experience of those mentioned above was very task oriented. Each knew their assignment and saw their duties rather narrowly. The experiences of the women that follow, however, was very different. These women served in leadership positions and in such capacity saw beyond their everyday work and understood the camp as a whole. Like the managers they were, they had to be able to assign and inspect the work of fellow *Aufseherinnen*, select and instruct prisoner functionaries, and make adaptations as necessary to maintain a productive workplace.

As mentioned above, Herta Ehlert was an employee who took an interest in doing her job well, was comfortable addressing her fellow *Aufseherinnen*, and spoke to her superiors about aspects of her jobs. Though she never reached the position herself, Ehlert served as the assistant to Elizabeth Volkenrath during her brief time as *Oberaufseherin* of Belsen. The middle-aged bakery saleswoman was conscripted in 1939 and her long service gave her experience in many areas of the camp and in many different camps. By the time she reached Belsen in February of 1945, Ehlert was appointed as Volkenrath's assistant and even filled in for her while Volkenrath was away. She describes this process in early March:

I had to try to detail the many *Aufseherinnen* who had arrived, numbering about 59. They walked about and had no particular jobs. They did what they liked and nobody knew

really what sort of job they should be doing. Therefore, as far as I could, I tried to bring order in that time.¹³³

It was left to Ehlert to decide which of these 59 *Aufseherinnen* would be assigned to the kitchens, peeling department, bread delivery, wood *Kommando*, bath house, and general supervision of the women's compound. And as described earlier, such assignments frequently changed, necessitating daily decisions from Ehlert. She took responsibility not only for assigning duties to other guards, but also evaluated their performance and issued needed reprimands when they fell short of her expectations. When *Aufseherinnen* failed to curtail the rampant theft of turnips and bread, Ehlert called a special *appell* to address the issue. She reminded *Aufseherinnen* that stealing was a serious offense to be dealt with harshly. If they did not increase their vigilance, she threatened to discipline them. As a person in a managerial position, Ehlert saw food shortage as a large-scale problem and not one of just an individual who protected a kitchen or vegetable store. In her capacity as assistant *Oberaufseherin* she sought out the SS man in charge of the food store to discuss the overall food shortage. He explained to her that railway bombings made delivery of more supplies impossible. Ehlert's concern regarding camp conditions extended beyond the food supply to include the deployable sanitation conditions of the camp.

As the weather warmed, Ehlert reported to one of the camp doctors that she was concerned about the open latrines as a potential cause of an epidemic. She was told there was no solution and they had no means of disinfection. Though her efforts at improvement were often met with inaction, she did convince Josef Kramer, then commandant, to decrease the number of *appells* during the final days of Belsen- a measure that reduced the strain on *Aufseherinnen* and prisoners alike.¹³⁴ Though never appointed as *Oberaufseherin*, she performed the duties expected

¹³³ PRO, WO 235/15, p. 63.

¹³⁴ PRO, WO 235/15, p. 66.

of that position, and she successfully demonstrated an ability to manage those below her and work with the camp administration above her.

Those in leadership positions were required to manage both *Aufseherinnen* and prisoners. In Birkenau, Maria Mandel instructed about thirty kapos in their daily duties. One woman, Hilde Lohbauer, remembers Mandel giving her the assignment of monitoring the work parties as they marched out the gate of the women's camp. As directed by Mandel, Lohbauer was to:

...stand at the gate, count them, and see how many went out. The same process happened when they came back at night. I also had to see to it that the working parties inside the camp really worked and did their jobs, and apart from that I had to ensure that the camp was tidy and clean.¹³⁵

As a prisoner functionary, she admitted to using violence against prisoners when their *appell* numbers did not add up correctly because she was accountable to the *Oberaufseherin*. Lohbauer did not state how or why she was chosen to be a prisoner functionary, but presumably she possessed useful skills recognized and co-opted by the guard staff. Stanislaw Starostka, a Polish prisoner functionary, clearly understood that she was selected by the *Oberaufseherin* because she spoke German, had bookkeeping skills, and had been in Birkenau a long time so that she understood the camp and its conditions.¹³⁶ The *Oberaufseherin* who picked her for this position chose wisely; Starostka was quickly promoted to Lagerälteste and remained in that position for almost two years. By placing competent people in positions of power, the *Oberaufseherin* made her own job easier and contributed to the camp running more smoothly.

Those in leadership had to be able to recognize problems with their staff and seek the needed solutions. As Birkenau grew, so too did the confusion of *Aufseherinnen* navigating the maze of unmarked barracks and offices. To address this issue, Maria Mandel commissioned Helen Tichauer to build a scale model of the women's camp to serve as a visual directory for

¹³⁵Phillips, *The Trial of Josef Kramer*, 275.

¹³⁶PRO, WO 235/17, p. 14.

Aufseherinnen and prisoner functionaries. Much time and care was put into this project and it reflected Mandel's conscientiousness about solving the problems in her workplace.¹³⁷

The ability to understand the whole of the camp and its changes over time was demonstrated by *Aufseherinnen* in leadership positions. Irma Grese, who served for a time as assistant *Oberaufseherin* in Birkenau, offered this description of her workplace and her *Dienstzeit* or time of service:

The prisoners came and went, the highest number being 30,000, but I generally had about 20,000. Although the prisoners changed in numbers, the number of *Aufseherinnen* remained the same. When the transports arrived the prisoners had been already selected and they were found fit for work. They went into the wash-house, washed, had their hair cut and then were distributed.¹³⁸

Her straightforward statement reveals her understanding of the camp. Because Grese was often involved with the *appell* process, she knew the number of prisoners, could speak to fluctuations over time, and understood the ratio of prisoners to guards. Grese performed her duties with six or seven *Aufseherinnen*, of which she was the most senior in rank, despite her young age of 20 years. She was responsible for the C Lager, where 30 buildings housed all prisoners. Grese understood that the infrastructure failed to accommodate the number of prisoners in her Lager. She noted that barracks built to hold between 100 to 300 prisoners at their maximum capacity held nearly a thousand per block. This is how she described the change in behavior of the prisoners as food became more scarce:

In the beginning when there were small numbers of them and they had sufficient to eat they were quite all right. Later on when I had twenty to thirty thousand they behaved like animals... Then at food distribution when people carried the food from the kitchen to the blocks, at nearly every corner there were 20 or 30 people who waited to pounce upon them and take the food away.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Matthäus, *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor*, 22.

¹³⁸ PRO, WO 235/15, p. 23.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

The phrasing she uses also suggests ownership of the sector of the camp she was charged with administering. Her tone is similar in addressing the sanitary conditions of Birkenau:

...in the beginning it was quite all right, but later on when the camp was overcrowded wherever you went it was just as if the prisoners thought that any place was good enough for a latrine, and the proper latrines were ruined by throwing all sorts of stuff into them, and then they simply ceased to function.¹⁴⁰

Again, she is able to assess change over time, and offers the perspective of management on the wretched state of the latrines. Her blame was misplaced, but her frustrations were real. The flawed system created conditions that impacted all those in Birkenau, causing even individuals in leadership positions to feel powerless to make improvements, and as a result they often took out their frustrations on the already suffering prisoner population.

Dorothea Binz showed similar understanding of her workplace over the course of her *Dienstzeit* in Ravensbrück. In contrast to *Aufseherinnen* in non-leadership positions, Binz aptly describes changes to Ravensbrück over her six years in the camp. She explains the seven departments within the camp that reported to the commandant and how they functioned, she details the most common offenses committed by prisoners, and she is familiar enough with the work assignments of *Aufseherinnen* to comment on their degree of difficulty. In short, there was no aspect of the camp of which she was not aware. As the *Oberaufseherin*, Binz articulated her philosophy of camp management by saying that physical means were needed to keep good order and discipline among a prisoner population of 30,000. She acknowledged that it was natural for prisoners to be mutinous or resistant to orders because they were in enemy hands. As the leader of that camp she felt it was her duty to set an example of severity to maintain order.¹⁴¹ Binz recalled that on a few occasions she was attacked by prisoners; once she was thrown to the

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ PRO, WO 235/312, p. 24.

ground and in another instance a prisoner put a bucket over her head. Binz resisted by striking the prisoners.¹⁴² It was also part of her job to conduct interrogations of prisoners for various offenses including the most common, theft. During such interrogations she sometimes beat prisoners if they lied or were “cheeky”.¹⁴³

Binz possessed the needed skills to rise quickly through the ranks. At 19 she started supervising working parties, then moved to the bunker which housed political prisoners in solitary confinement, diseased women, and the mentally unstable, after which she became deputy *Oberaufseherin*, and finally the chief wardress. During her time in the bunker she worked under Maria Mandel. It is possible that such association helped Binz hone her own leadership skills. Once reaching the rank of *Oberaufseherin*, she maintained it for the rest of Ravensbrück’s existence.

Gender and the Workplace



¹⁴² *ibid.*, 37.

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, 40.

Pictured centrally above is Commandant Richard Baer and former commandant Rudolf Höss as they strode away from the dedication of an SS hospital in Auschwitz in late 1944. It was a momentous occasion for the SS administration, marked by much ceremony and many visiting officials.¹⁴⁴ Following behind these bosses of Auschwitz, are officers of lesser note, and behind them some nurses tag along in the background. Mostly hidden behind these men, head down, glove in gloved hand, is Maria Mandel, the head overseer of the women's camp. She is the most powerful, important woman in Auschwitz and yet she barely makes the shot.¹⁴⁵ Mandel walks alone, not accompanied by her fellow *Aufseherinnen* subordinates. She is not in front with her colleagues of equal rank, nor is she at the back with the nurses who share her gender. Instead, Maria Mandel occupies a space of her own; an awkward, middle area that lacks a conceptual space. Though her job was identical to that of a man's, her gender kept her from being "one of the boys." And though she was a woman, her job prohibited her from being "one of the girls." In this photo, in the camp system, and in Germany, the women of the SS *Aufseherinnen* failed to "fit in." They were not the mothers and nurses performing traditional women's work in service of the Reich. The state asked them to do a man's job, yet as suggested in the above image, these women were not admitted to a partnership of equality in their workplace. Within this system of discrimination and inequality, women devised strategies to conform to the prevailing gender norms that governed camp culture and their employment. As shown previously, these tactics often resulted in an increased use of violence towards prisoners.

¹⁴⁴ The occasion was documented by 25 photographs in the album of Karl Höcker, adjunct to commandant Richard Baer. The personal album consisted of 116 photographs taken during the last six months of Auschwitz, between June 1944 and January 1945. The album contains photographs of official ceremonies and visits and a variety of social activities in and around Auschwitz. That 25 of the 116 images are of the hospital dedication speak to this event's importance. All photographs from the Höcker album found at [http://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog?utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=hoecker+album&search_field=all_fields&f\[rec_ord_type_facet\]\[\]=Photograph&commit=search](http://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog?utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=hoecker+album&search_field=all_fields&f[rec_ord_type_facet][]=Photograph&commit=search).

¹⁴⁵ Although the album contains numerous photos of the male administrators of Auschwitz, this is the only photo of Maria Mandel in Auschwitz known to exist.

It has also been suggested that an overall militarization of German culture during the war brought women into the scope of camaraderie enjoyed between military men. By extension this meant greater equality for women; a partnership between women and men to accomplish the work of the Reich.¹⁴⁶ While widespread militarization might have advanced equality between soldiers and their wives, it did not cause these military men to make partners of women who invaded their male workspace. Ultimately, it is the prisoners who suffered the cost of sexism imposed on female guards. In such cases, these women were not acting out in violence because they enjoyed it or because they were following orders, but rather because they were subjected to the pressures of their workplace. They chose to react in a way they believed would earn them respect and possibly make their job easier. Though it is clear that the *Aufseherinnen* were actively engaged in the daily work of the camp, they are absent from its photographic record. The photographs preserved in the Höcker album reveal much about the staff dynamics in Auschwitz. Mandel is absent from all but one photograph when dozens include male administrators. This speaks to the separateness of the *Aufseherinnen*. They are not present in photos of formal dedications or ceremonies, or in the numerous shots depicting the social activities of the SS men that surrounded Höcker. Though the *Aufseherinnen* are missing, not even accidentally captured in the background, the other women of the Auschwitz staff, the *Helperinnen* who worked in the offices as secretaries and telecommunication specialists, are present in 20 of the 116 photos. Unlike the *Aufseherinnen*, the *Helperinnen* occupied a traditional space for women, they were the “office girls,” the secretaries to the male administrators. As such their presence did not disturb the workplace, but rather adhered to the gendered work norms of

¹⁴⁶Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, eds., *Home/Front: The Military, War, and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 89.

the time. The photographs that follow capture this comfortable and recognizable dynamic between men and their female subordinates.



Figure 6- Suddenly it began to rain. Höcker



Figure 7- There are blueberries here. Höcker



Figure 8- With the SS girls. Höcker

These photos were taken approximately 18 miles from the Auschwitz complex where the SS constructed a small resort for SS personnel, administrators, guards and their guests. At *Solahütte*, Auschwitz employees could get away from the world of the camp and enjoy sunbathing, swimming, singing, hunting, and hiking.¹⁴⁷ The above photos show Karl Höcker, the adjunct to the commandant, male officers, and the *Helferinnen*. In the first photo, they have a sing along when it begins to rain. Höcker lightheartedly captions the picture “Suddenly it began to rain!” In the second, Höcker hands out blueberries to his “office girls” while another man plays the accordion. The photo below shows Höcker talking with the *Helferinnen* on the chartered bus en

¹⁴⁷After the war Polish Communists took over the facility and expanded its grounds for use by top Party officials. Following the fall of Communism in Poland the area was abandoned, though the main lodge is still in operation as a tavern. Its significance to the Holocaust went largely unnoticed until the discovery of the Höcker Album in 2007 by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

route to their retreat. These and many others in Höcker's album capture an air of playfulness and fun. Höcker worked closely with these women on a daily basis. He also gave them a day off and accompanied them to enjoy an outing beyond the offices of Auschwitz. The number of *Helferinnen* is also striking. At least 13 *Helferinnen* are pictured in this series of photos- about half as many woman as were left back in Birkenau charged with guarding 30,000 prisoners.



Figure 9- No original caption- SS officers socialize at Solahutte. From right to left: Richard Baer, Josef Mengele, Josef Kramer, Rudolf Hoss, and Anton Thumann. Höcker

Like those showing Höcker and the office girls, this photo shows colleagues contentedly talking and smoking. At first glance it is possible to miss just who is in this photo. It includes three commandants of Auschwitz, Josef Mengele and Anton Thumann, all very notable and important

in the administration of Auschwitz. The photo below captures many of the same officers of note, along with regular officers in what appears to be yet another sing along.



Figure 10- A sing along. Includes Karl Höcker, Rudolf Hoss, Richard Baer, and Josef Mengele. Höcker

This album offers a glimpse into the leisure time of perpetrators and into the unofficial structure of the Auschwitz staff. Everyone is represented except the *Aufseherinnen*. The omission is striking: dozens of photos show male officers in their leisure time, many include the *Helferinnen*, but none show a social mixing of the *Aufseherinnen* and their male colleagues. It is difficult to know if the *Aufseherinnen* were offered leisure time at *Solahütte*. If they were there, they did not appear to socialize with either the *Helferinnen* or the male officers- yet another reminder of their separateness, their lack of conceptual space. It also highlights that while the male officers were

often resentful and disdainful of the *Aufseherinnen*, they seemed quite comfortable with women who occupied more traditional roles for women.

Conclusion

The *Aufseherinnen* were hard at work in a number of ways. They were responsible for conducting *appell*, supervising work details, managing the kitchens, protecting food stores, and distributing rations, and they had to have the flexibility to frequently change work assignments and crews. Those in leadership managed and inspected their work, selected and instructed kapos, liaised with male administration, and made the necessary adaptations to keep things running smoothly. All these duties were carried out amid the difficult conditions of overcrowding, food scarcity, and staff shortages, and often without the support of their male superiors. Despite these circumstances, they executed their duties to the best of their abilities, fully participating in the running of these camps. At times this included violent action toward prisoners. It is for this that they are most remembered, but such violence was a byproduct of their work, not their job.

The image of these women in the postwar world has been both shaped and misinformed by accounts such as Höss' and those of survivors given without context. Looking closer, we find that these women were not omnipotent monsters driven by cruelty or madness, nor were they incompetent. Rather, they were perpetrators, who exercised choice in the way they acted, while at the same time being subjected to gender discrimination and stereotyping. Thus, they never received the full measure of respect accorded to the SS, and their role in running the camps was never fully recognized by the male administration.

Recognition of their labors came only at the end of the war; and at a moment least personally beneficial to them. Though never granted equality by the Nazis, the Allies had no

trouble seeing that these women bore equal responsibility for the running of the camps. When the war ended and the war trials began, women of the *Aufseherinnen* and SS men were tried, sentenced, and in some cases, executed side by side. Remarkably, when asked about their role in the camps and the specifics of their work, few women shrank from disclosure. They did not shift blame to their superiors, but rather attempted to explain the details of their employment.

Though admitting and seizing responsibility cost some their lives, they grabbed it. For it was only in the moment of postwar justice that the women of the SS were admitted to full equality and a greater portion of punishment. What their own bosses could not see, the Allied powers that prosecuted them unhesitatingly acknowledged.

CHAPTER THREE

A Crucible: Trials and Justice

“Belsen Death Camp Leaders Meet Justice!” The white words of the newsreel hang on a gray, flickering screen, as clashing notes of bombastic brass ring out. With dark zeal a newscaster’s voice proclaims: “To a British military tribunal at Lüneberg is brought a sordid assortment of Nazi war criminals, headed by the notorious Josef Kramer charged with responsibility of torture and mass murder of 50,000 prisoners at the German death camp at Belsen.” The camera shifts from Kramer and his armed guards to a group of women awkwardly tumbling from the back of a transport truck. “Belsen’s women,” the voice identifies them, “as savage as any of the men.” One woman turns to offer her arm, helping the next in her descent. “Kramer’s chief assistant, 21 years old and veteran of five years of atrocities, is Fraulein Irma Grese.” The brassy music swells dramatically as the camera finds a poised and polished Grese, then cuts abruptly to an overhead shot of the courtroom. “The accused wear identifying numbers in early court sessions. There are 26 men and 19 women...The average of men and women alike is 1,000 deaths apiece.” Now seated in the courtroom dock, the camera pans slowly across those accused, then cuts to footage of Belsen, where thousands of bodies are laid out in rows as the clean-up efforts are underway. Triumphantly, the voice concludes, “The first batch of Nazi butchers... awaits the verdict of Allied justice.”¹⁴⁸

A theatrical beginning to a dramatic trial, this short newsreel captures the attitude of the victors, their view of the Nazis they arrested, and their pursuit of justice. The film’s music and

¹⁴⁸ *Belsen Death Camp Leaders Meet Justice*, 35mm, 1.15 min., (Office of War Information: United News, 1945), National Archives and Records Administration, 208 UN 176. Newsreel such as this shaped public opinion early in regard to the *Aufseherinnen*. As will be discussed later, the same stock footage was used by the German press as well, though the voiceover showed a markedly different attitude toward the female guards.

style were that of wartime propaganda, a reminder that the Allies had barely finished fighting the war before they began prosecuting its criminals. The misidentification of Belsen as a death camp signifies how little the Allies knew and understood about the concentration camp system at the outset of the trial process. The labels of “savage” and “Nazi butchers” belong to a wartime lexicon that bled into the immediate postwar period. The film reel, literally and figuratively, puts a face to the crimes of the Nazi system that Allied nations had long fought to end. The film moves from tight shots of Nazi faces, to a long shot of bodies at Belsen, connecting the individuals seated in the dock quite directly to the scores of nameless, faceless masses who died within the camp.

Despite the ominous music and the dramatic voiceover, the women who tumble onscreen hardly appear to match the labels of savages and butchers. They look like ordinary women. This newsreel does something additionally important that features throughout the Belsen trial, and subsequent war crimes trials involving *Aufseherinnen*: it equalizes the status of women and men. Irma Grese was singled out and identified as Kramer’s chief assistant, significantly over-inflating her status and importance; although she was assistant *Oberaufseherin* in Birkenau, in Belsen she held no major leadership position. Likewise, the film divides the death toll equally among the men and women defendants, granting them the same responsibility. This attitude continued throughout the trials, and was distinctly different from the disdain of the male administrators of the *Aufseherinnen*. From the beginning, the agency of the *Aufseherinnen* was misunderstood. Yet, it is this concept of power that was codified in popular discourse and culture in the postwar world, and which continues in our own time. This chapter primarily examines the Belsen trial, and includes additional evidence from the Ravensbrück trial - the two largest trials to deal with the *Aufseherinnen* in the immediate postwar years. In doing so, it will demonstrate that the

Aufseherinnen owned their actions, and poorly navigated the trials in ways unlike their male colleagues, resulting in higher rates of conviction for the *Aufseherinnen*. It will show that media attention surrounding the trial disproportionately focused on female perpetrators and their crimes, thus creating an inaccurate image of the *Aufseherinnen*. Lastly, it looks at the strategies of appeal utilized by *Aufseherinnen*.

Overview of Postwar Trials

The Moscow Declaration of October 1943 mandated that war criminals be tried by the countries in which the crimes had been committed.¹⁴⁹ Excluded from this, were those individuals whose crimes were not confined to one geographic area, such as those who staffed the concentration camps. These criminals were tried under the London Agreement on the Punishment of the Major War Criminals of the European Axis, established in August 1945. This created the basis for the International Military Tribunal.¹⁵⁰ The Royal Warrant ‘Regulations for the Trial of War Criminals’ Army Order 81/45 June 14, 1945, set the guidelines for British military trials. This followed the standard procedure of British military law: the court consisted of three to five military officers who served as judges, and a Judge Advocate, who advised the judges on legal and procedural questions throughout the investigation and trial.¹⁵¹

The Belsen Trial began the era of postwar justice in the West. Trials of the staff from other major and minor concentration camps followed over the next few years, as did the more

¹⁴⁹ If German defendants were convicted by an international court and not a German one, the German government recognized the duration of their prison sentence as time spent as a prisoner of war, thus entitling these individuals to a government pension.

¹⁵⁰ This was further developed by Allied Council Law No. 10, December 1945. It included crimes against peace, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and memberships in organizations declared criminal. The British held 358 trials See *Law Reports of Trials of War Criminals*, selected and prepared by the United Nations War Crimes Commission, vol. 2.

¹⁵¹ Ulf Schmitt, “The Scares of Ravensbrück: Medical Experiments and British War Crimes Policy, 1945-1950,” *German History* 23, no. 1 (2005): 22, 20-49.

famous Nuremberg Trials, which overshadowed previous exercises in justice.¹⁵² Each trial reflected the particular moment of its time and served to highlight particular issues. Belsen was the first trial of the Nazi system and reflected the immediate postwar attitude. The first Ravensbrück trial was concerned with the camp staff, but also heavily focused on the medical experiments conducted on prisoners. The high-profile Nuremberg Trial was about the Nazi system and larger questions of humanity and justice.

These trials were conducted in the uncertain postwar atmosphere. Allied nations were still jostling for power and influence at the dawn of the Cold War world.¹⁵³ In the East, trials conducted in Soviet-controlled territory were swift and high in death sentences. There was less of an attempt at impartial justice or in learning about the Nazi system and more focus on punishing Germans for Soviet sufferings. In the West, the British were eager to set the standard for war crimes trials, particularly through the Belsen trial, before the Americans became involved in the Nuremberg Trials, set to begin in late November. Much was at stake for all involved.

The Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-Four Others, or the Belsen Trial, as it came to be known was held in Lüneberg, Germany, a small town near the site of Bergen-Belsen. It took place from September 17 to November 17, 1945. Belsen was located in the British zone of occupation; therefore, the trial was conducted by British authorities. All defendants chose to be

¹⁵² The first series of Nuremberg Trials began three days after the conclusion of the Belsen Trial, on November 20, 1945, and lasted until October 1, 1946. This trial dealt with those in leadership and high profile positions within the Nazi system, including: Hermann Göring, Rudolf Hess, Albert Speer, Julius Streicher, and Wilhelm Keitel. Subsequent Nuremberg Trials were conducted 1946-1949 and charged doctors, judges, and other civilians. Other trials of concentration camp personnel took place in two waves. The first wave took place from November 1945-1948 and included Dachau, Mauthausen, Flossenbürg, Buchenwald, Muldorf, Mora-Nordhausen, Ravensbrück, and the first Auschwitz trial. All but the Auschwitz trial were conducted by Western powers. The second wave took place from 1963-1965 and included Sobibor, Belzec, the second Auschwitz Trial, and Majdanek.

¹⁵³ See Trials of War Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No.10, vols. 1., 15, Oct. 1946, April 1949 and Helge Grabitz, "Die Verfolgung von NS-Gewaltverbrechen in Hamburg in der Zeit von 1946 bis heute", in Helge Grabitz et al. (eds).

represented by British, rather than German counsel.¹⁵⁴ The court consisted of a president, four members of the court, a Judge Advocate, and four men as counsel for the prosecution.¹⁵⁵ Even though it was a military court, the Royal Warrant of June 1945 rejected the defense of acting under superior orders; thus that often repeated defense was not a part of the Belsen Trial.¹⁵⁶ The language of the trial was English, interpreted answer by answer, but speeches made by counsel were not interpreted word for word, but summarized in translation for the defendants. The accused wore numbers to identify them, but their numbers and positions in the dock changed to insure fairness. The trial lasted 44 days, at the end of which sentences were handed down. Because it was a military court, no reasoned judgments were delivered, leaving only the length of the sentence to provide insight. This lack of explanation proved problematic and confusing to the public when 14 of the accused were found “not guilty.” Public opinion criticized the tribunal for its leniency; many expected all to be convicted and sentenced to death.¹⁵⁷ At times, the trial was confusing and frustrating for those involved because it was a new exercise in international justice.

Much of the procedure for the first Ravensbrück trial was similar to that of Belsen; the court was a military tribunal, the language was English, and defendants chose British counsel. It took place from December 3, 1946, to February 3, 1947, in Hamburg, Germany.¹⁵⁸ Unlike the

¹⁵⁴ Major T.C.M. Winwood, Major Cranfield, Major Munro, Captain Roberts, Major Brown, Captain Fielden, Captain Corbally, Captain Neave, Captain Phillips, Captain Boyd, and Lieutenant Jedrzejowicz represented the defense.

¹⁵⁵ Major-General, H.M.P. Berney-Ficklin, C.B., M.C., as President; Brigadier A. DE L. Casonove, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.V.O; Colonel G.J. Richards, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.R.; Lieutenant-Colonel R.B. Morrish, T.D., R.A.; Lieutenant-Colonel R. McLay, R.A. all members of the court. C.L. Stirling, Esq., C.B.E., K.C. as Deputy Judge Advocate General. Colonel T.M. Backhouse, M.B.E., T.D., Major H.G. Murton-Neale, Captain S.M. Stewart, and Lieutenant-Colonel L.J. Genn as counsel for the prosecution.

¹⁵⁶ Royal Warrant, Regulations for the Trial of War Criminals, 18 June 1945, War Office.

¹⁵⁷ Schmitt, “Ravensbrück”, p., 43.

¹⁵⁸ The British conducted a total of seven trials concerning Ravensbrück. The first was the largest and the longest. The trial was also impacted by the conditions of Hamburg. Heavily bombed during the war, much of the city was destroyed. By the time of the trial electricity was still in short supply and candles and oil lamps rationed.

much larger Belsen trial, this trial had only 17 defendants, and unlike the earlier trial, all 17 were found guilty. Ravensbrück was officially in the Soviet zone of occupation; thus the trial of camp staff fell under Soviet jurisdiction. Though Soviet investigators filed initial reports on the conditions of Ravensbrück immediately following liberation, they made no further investigations, nor did they show any interest in trying the camp personnel.¹⁵⁹ Additionally, most of Ravensbrück's staff were not in Soviet custody, but had escaped to the West and were arrested by the British Army. Consequently, any trial required the extradition of these individuals from British custody, extra measures the Soviets were unwilling to take. As a result, the prosecution of the Ravensbrück staff was left to the British.

The makeup of the court was similar to that of Belsen: it included a president, Major General V.J.E. Westropp, CBE, who presided over six members of the court, though two of them did not belong to the British forces- Major Kazimierz Olszewski represented Poland, and Colonel Henri de Bonnechose represented the French government.¹⁶⁰ Major S.M. Stewart, Captain J.W. da Cunha, and Madame Aline Chalufour served as prosecution. The charges too were similar.¹⁶¹

This was particularly problematic for defendants imprisoned during the trial. Their legal counsel made repeated requests for lighting to be provided to their clients in the nighttime hours so that they could adequately prepare their defense and communicate with their counsel. See PRO, WO 234/305.

¹⁵⁹ Schmitt, "Ravensbruck," p. 34. Also see Sigrid Jacobeit and Simone Erpel, *Ich grüsse Euch als freier Mensch: Quellenedition zur Befreiung des Frauen-Konzentrationslagers Ravensbrück im April 1945* (Berlin: Hentrich, 1995).

¹⁶⁰ Because so many of the victims of the medical experiments were Polish and French nationals, both countries expressed interest in holding the trial, Britain refused to give up its claim and so a compromise was reached that each country would have a representative on the court.

¹⁶¹ "Charged jointly with committing a war crime in that they at Ravensbrück in the years 1939 to 1945, when members of the staff of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp, in violation of the laws and usages of war, were concerned in the ill-treatment and killing of Allied nationals interned therein." See PRO WO 225.

As the first trial of its kind, the Belsen trial received media attention particularly in English-speaking countries.¹⁶² Perhaps because of its immediacy, widespread German attention was not as great as it was for the later Ravensbrück trial. Belsen press coverage focused particularly on Kramer's leadership and on the crimes of the female defendants. Ravensbrück coverage was more widespread because so many Allied nationals were imprisoned there, and focused more generally on camp conditions and the medical experiments conducted there. German coverage of Ravensbrück was less sensationalized than that of British coverage of Belsen. There is also better data available on German public opinion of the later trial. More spectators attended the trial in Hamburg. Many were motivated by curiosity and others wished to form their own opinion of the proceedings rather than rely on media accounts.¹⁶³ Though the attitude of Germans varied on the Ravensbrück trial, private citizens certainly had opinions. Some felt the witnesses were unreliable and had been prepared by the prosecution. Others expressed great satisfaction that the former camp staff was now on trial and supported the Allied pursuit of justice.¹⁶⁴ Some expressed satisfaction at the fate of the accused. One woman told her friend, "I have followed the Ravensbrück trial and I am satisfied that the witch Binz is kaput. Now her angel's head will begin to rot."¹⁶⁵

Though often overshadowed by the Nuremberg Trials of the leaders of Nazi Germany, the proceedings in Lüneberg and Hamburg were important examples of postwar justice towards individuals in lesser positions of power. By looking at these trials, it is possible to see how the *Aufseherinnen* were judged for their wartime service.

¹⁶² Though covered by both the American and British press, stories about Belsen more frequently appeared on the front page of British publications, while they featured in less prominent positions in American newspapers.

¹⁶³ Schmitt, "Ravensbrück," p. 42.

¹⁶⁴ PRO, WO 309/165.

¹⁶⁵ PRO, WO 309/420.

The Belsen Trial

For weeks Lüneberg prepared for the trial's beginning. With no suitable courthouse available, carpenters converted the town's gymnasium hall into a courtroom. The renovations included an addition of a cinema screen for the admission of film evidence, a practice never before used in legal proceedings. The town also prepared for the arrival of the defendants, who were transferred to the city prison from their cells in the nearby town of Celle, where they had been held since their arrest in mid-April. For a brief moment, this small city in northern Germany was the focus of international justice.

There were significant issues in preparing for such a trial. Defense counsel was assigned late, with some defendants only meeting their lawyers ten days prior to the beginning of the trial. Much to the disappointment of the accused, hearsay evidence was accepted and frequently used, as were affidavits from individuals who could no longer be found to appear in court. Often witnesses who gave these affidavits made identifications using only a photograph, leaving open the possibility of misidentification. The unusual nature of the case meant that less than usual methods were accepted.

On the morning of September 17, members of the court, legal counsel, scores of shorthand writers and interpreters, members of the press, and German civilians crammed into the stuffy, makeshift courtroom. At 10 a.m., dressed in variations of gray, green, and brown, the defendants marched to their place in the dock. Their arrival at the courthouse was met with cinema spotlights, swarms of photographers, and a crowd of onlookers. Now inside, the defendants appeared white-faced and frightened.¹⁶⁶ The court was called to order, and the charges read aloud.

¹⁶⁶ Mia Allan, "Living, Dying, Dead, Altogether," *Daily Herald* (London), 18 September 1945, sec 1A.

... between 1st October, 1942 and 30th April, 1945, when members of the staff of Bergen-Belsen concentration Camp responsible for the well-being of the person interned there, in violation of the law and usages of war, were together concerned as parties to the ill-treatment of certain of such persons, causing the deaths of... Allied nationals, and other Allied nationals whose names are unknown, and physical suffering to other persons interned there, Allied nationals, and particularly to... and other Allied nationals whose names are unknown.¹⁶⁷

There were two possible charges; the first concerned actions in Bergen-Belsen, the second in Auschwitz. Prosecutors meant to determine guilt for personal acts of killing or brutality and for responsibility for the death, suffering and overall conditions of the camp. Under the glare of floodlights, the defendants rose and all 45 answered “not guilty.” Herta Ehlert grew pale and began to faint. Irma Grese grasped her arm to steady her, and then Ehlert began to cry.¹⁶⁸ For months she and her former colleagues had been imprisoned awaiting this day. It had been six months since Belsen was liberated by the British army. Now Ehlert sat uneasily in silence. She was unable to comprehend the proceedings that day, which were given only in English with no translation.¹⁶⁹ For hours, the court listened to legal arguments from the defense to try the charges separately. Because some individuals were charged in only one location, there was concern about the legality of trying individuals who committed crimes in two separate locations in one trial. In addition, the defense requested a delay in the trial proceedings until an expert in international law could be added to the defense team. The tedium and confusion of the first day highlighted the novelty and difficulty of the proceedings. The field of international law was still very new and experts hard to obtain. Both objections raised by the defense were overruled, and the court proceeded to opening arguments from the prosecution.

From the first day, the disconnect between the outside world and the world of those who worked in the camps became apparent. Colonel Backhouse of the prosecution described the state

¹⁶⁷ PRO WO 235/15.

¹⁶⁸ Mia Allan, “Living, Dying, Dead, Altogether,” 1A.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

of Belsen as it existed when liberated by the British Army. What had been the everyday workplace of the *Aufseherinnen* was now described for the court and the world. On April 15, 1945, the British took control of the camp. Originally built to house 10,000 prisoners, by liberation Belsen contained close to 60,000; over half of those had arrived in the last two months.¹⁷⁰ Less than a mile long and about 400 yards wide, it was surrounded by wire and contained about 60 wooden huts, 15 of which were used by guards. The 45 prisoner huts were built to hold 80 persons; at liberation they held between 600 and 1,000 each. Some of the buildings had bunks, others had none. These prisoner barracks overflowed with inmates in every stage of emaciation and disease. Only five cookhouses supplied the camp; water came from two concrete ponds, which by mid-April had been contaminated by numerous corpses that floated in them.

The camp was further split into five compounds- three for men and two for women. Together the three men's compounds contained about 12,000 inmates watched over by 100 SS men. The two women's compounds held 28,000 women and 500 children; these inmates were supervised by 40 or 50 *Aufseherinnen*. The women's compound was significantly more overcrowded and disease was more prevalent. One barrack was so full women could not lie down straight. The main room was one mass of both the living and the dead. Some prisoners had blankets and clothing, others had none. Most were suffering from some sort of gastroenteritis and were too weak to leave the barracks. Had they been able to reach the latrines they would have found them non-functional. The strain of the 60,000 inhabitants and the perpetual water shortage was too much for its infrastructure. A few large pits with poles across were constructed as make-

¹⁷⁰ Until July 1944 there were about 7,300 prisoners in Belsen. By December 1944 that number had increased to 15,000., and by February 1945 the numbers swelled to 22,000. As Eastern camps continued to evacuate westward, Belsen gained 40,000 additional prisoners over the next two months to bring its final total to just over 60,000.

shift latrines, though most inmates were not strong enough to drag themselves to the pits and over the pole. Over 80 percent of the inmates suffered from dysentery. Thus, the compounds were a mass of human waste. Amid the diseased filth were 13,000 unburied corpses lying in piles of various sizes. Some bodies showed signs of cannibalism. Near the crematorium were partially filled mass graves. Those prisoners strong enough to walk tried to get food from what was left of the kitchen stores. And on the first night of British control, even the British guards had to fire shots over the heads of prisoners to maintain order.¹⁷¹

Such details shocked those who heard them, but not the defendants. For the rest of the trial, defendants struggled to bridge the divide between the reality of the camps as noted by outsiders and their reality of the camp that was their everyday workplace. Defendants continued to describe their actions and their workplace with a vocabulary of normalcy that belonged to a reality that no longer existed. Their answers, therefore, appeared disconnected from reality, because, in fact, they were.

Gender Matters

Though the Allies assigned female and male perpetrators equal responsibility for the conditions of the camps and the mistreatment of prisoners, when it came to the legal proceedings they received different treatment. From the beginning, the prosecution disadvantaged the women on trial by presenting their actions differently from the men's, by ascribing enjoyment of violence to women but not to men, and by demanding remorse only from female defendants. In this way, unconsciously held gender norms dictated their prosecution.

¹⁷¹ PRO WO 235/15.

On the first day of the trial, Colonel Backhouse of the prosecution introduced the conditions at Belsen; he then introduced those deemed responsible for the situation. First, Kramer and the others who served in both Auschwitz and Belsen were described; then he moved through the rest of the 45 accused. When Backhouse described the men on trial, he stated when they joined the SS, where they served and in what capacity. He did not comment upon specific accusations against them. The following example is typical of his method: “No. 3. Weingartner, was a Blockführer of one of the women’s camps at Auschwitz and had some 1,000 women under him. At Belsen he again became Blockführer.”¹⁷² However, when introducing the former *Aufseherinnen*, Backhouse used the following model: “No. 7, Volkenrath, regularly took part in the selections for the gas chamber at Auschwitz, and she inflicted many personal cruelties on people. When she came to Belsen she was placed in charge of all S.S. women as the head woman in the camp by Kramer. You will hear again of her many cruelties at Belsen.”¹⁷³ His opening statement included the words “cruel” and “cruelties” no fewer than nine times, all in reference to former *Aufseherinnen*. Backhouse stated that Bormann took part in the “amusement of setting dogs on women” and said of Grese that there was “not one type of cruelty which took place in that camp [Auschwitz] for which she has not been known as being responsible.”¹⁷⁴ Many of the men on trial had been present at selections for the gas chambers, many too were accused of beatings and murder and even dog attacks, but these details did not appear in their initial introduction to the court. From the very first day of the trial, the former *Aufseherinnen* were labeled with a brutality not assigned to their male colleagues.

¹⁷² PRO, WO 235/15, p 28. Weingartner was also accused of having a dog that attacked prisoners and he was convicted by the Court and sentenced to death. Though his actions were similar to those of the *Aufseherinnen*, his “cruelties” were not described in his first introduction.

¹⁷³ PRO, WO 235/15, p 28.

¹⁷⁴ PRO, WO 235/15, p. 28-29.

The pattern established on the first day continued through the trial. The prosecution frequently stated that former *Aufseherinnen* enjoyed the cruelty they inflicted on prisoners, yet made no similar presumption about the SS men. When questioning Ilse Forster, one of the *Aufseherinnen* in charge of a kitchen in Belsen, Colonel Backhouse suggested that she “amused” herself by waiting by the kitchen stores of food to beat people. Forster replied that she never enjoyed it. Though she did not deny striking prisoners, she was clear that her motivations were to prevent stealing, not to inflict pain for her personal satisfaction.¹⁷⁵ The prosecution suggested that Irma Grese took pleasure in striking inmates. Backhouse said to her, “You made a habit of beating women and of kicking them, and you enjoyed it. ... You found it great fun to hit someone who could not hit back?”¹⁷⁶ Grese responded that she did not enjoy it. Backhouse further suggested to Grese- “You gloried in your jackboots and your pistol and your whip.” Grese replied “Gloried? I could not say so.”¹⁷⁷ The prosecution’s language is striking, his choice of words such as “enjoyed”, “fun”, and “gloried” all suggest a deviant view of violence. The prosecution made no similar suggestions to male defendants. Backhouse accused Grese of fashioning whips on her own and asked if others did the same. She said no. Backhouse asked, “So it was just you who was vicious?” Grese responded, “It had nothing to do with being vicious.” It was perhaps the most insightful comment of her entire testimony and highlighted the disconnect between the shattered reality of the camp world and the current reality of courtroom. Similar language was used in the Ravensbrück trial as well. *Oberaufseherin* Dorothea Binz was accused by the prosecution of “amusing” herself with the “madwomen” of the punishment

¹⁷⁵ PRO, WO 235/15, p. 376.

¹⁷⁶ PRO, WO 234/15, p 136.

¹⁷⁷PRO, WO 234/15, p 18.

bunker.¹⁷⁸ Her defense counsel rejected the accusation that Binz struck prisoners out of “the sheer joy of beating.”¹⁷⁹

While Backhouse assigned feelings of enjoyment of violence to the female defendants, he also expected more admissions of shock and sorrow for their actions and sympathy from the former *Aufseherinnen* toward prisoners. Irene Haschke, the *Aufseherin* who began using a stick to chase prisoners away from the kitchen because she saw a male guard do it, was asked if she was “terribly shocked” by the number of dying people and if she and her female colleagues ever discussed what they could do to help the prisoners. Haschke agreed that conditions were bad, but they did not discuss prisoner conditions in their free time.¹⁸⁰ Backhouse took a similar approach with Hilde Lisiewitz: “Did it ever occur to any of you to try to help these people, to organize some sort of nursing for them or clean the place or do anything at all? Did you not discuss between yourselves what you could do?” She replied, “No. We *Aufseherinnen* could not do anything about it.” He tried again, “Did you care in the least?” Lisiewitz answered, “When no food arrived we could do nothing about it.”¹⁸¹ In both cases, Backhouse wanted these women to express typically female emotions. He wanted them to be shocked by the conditions, to feel sorry for the inmates, and to clean and to nurse the sick. When Backhouse questioned SS men, even those in positions of authority, he did not place the same expectations of care and assistance on them. Men were not expected to feel sympathy or sorrow and certainly not to be shocked by the dying. When the former *Aufseherinnen* did not display the appropriate gendered reactions it hurt their case.

¹⁷⁸ PRO, WO 235/305, p. 21.

¹⁷⁹ PRO, WO 235/305, p. 8.

¹⁸⁰ PRO, WO 234/15, p. 395.

¹⁸¹ PRO, WO 234/15, p. 407.

As assistant *Oberaufseherin*, Herta Ehlert attempted small improvements to prisoner conditions, yet during her testimony she also admitted to having her fortune told by a prisoner.¹⁸² The prosecution said, “How many prisoners do you think died of hunger and thirst that day whilst you were having your fortune told? You who did so much for all these prisoners and wanted to do so much could think of nothing better to do than have your fortune told while they were dying. Is that right?” She simply said, “It only took ten minutes to do that.” He pressed her further and suggested that she just wanted them let them die. Ehlert stated, “What could one individual person like me do with so many thousands of prisoners?”¹⁸³ Her responses speak to the reality of her workplace and the limitations of her position. She knew no matter how she spent those ten minutes the conditions of Belsen would not change, nor did she realize how ridiculous it sounded to say she sought out a prisoner fortuneteller at such a moment.

Poor Navigation

In addition to the unequal treatment by the prosecution the former *Aufseherinnen* received, they also navigated the legal proceedings poorly. Lacking education and worldly experience, they responded with excessive candor, owned their actions in a way that was not personally advantageous, and missed cues that could have provided them legal cover. These issues did not plague the men who were tried alongside them. At the conclusion of the trial 84

¹⁸² The point of Ehlert’s admission was to say she gave extra food to the female prisoner who told her fortune. Unfortunately for her that minor point was missed as Backhouse pounced on the opportunity to show how Ehlert neglected prisoners and indulged in personal endeavors.

¹⁸³ PRO, WO 234/15, p. 240-241.

percent of female defendants were found guilty, while only 50 percent of male defendants were convicted.¹⁸⁴

In contrast to many of the SS men put on trial, the *Aufseherinnen* displayed a surprising frankness. They frequently admitted to using violence against prisoners and explained the conditions that warranted the action. Typically, they cited the infractions of not following orders or stealing as the main reasons for punishment. They also freely admitted that the official procedure required that they file a report with their administration before the offenders were officially punished. Yet, they explained, this was impractical due to the frequency of infractions, so they administered the punishments themselves, without filing a report. Many did so because they saw it as necessary to their jobs, even though their training had not prepared them for this adaptation. As *Oberaufseherin* in Ravensbrück, Binz admitted that there were as many as 40 or 50 reports per week in 1944, which is why, she explained, she frequently punished without filing a report.¹⁸⁵ She also stated that sometimes she struck women who were “impudent” or did not keep their cells cleaned.¹⁸⁶ The Judge Advocate asked Binz if she could estimate how many women she had hit during her time in leadership: was it “a matter of dozens or hundreds or thousands?” Binz replied, “I certainly could not tell you the number.”¹⁸⁷ Binz could have easily answered with the smallest suggestion, yet instead she added, “Some days I boxed the ears of prisoners and some days I did not. Just as the camp discipline required it; it varied.”¹⁸⁸ Elizabeth Volkenrath admitted to striking prisoners in Belsen and Auschwitz, but explained, “If they did

¹⁸⁴ 16 of the 19 female defendants were found guilty, while only 13 of the 26 male defendants were convicted.

¹⁸⁵ PRO, WO 235/305, p. 9.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁸⁷ PRO, WO 235/305, p.16.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

not obey orders and were slapped it was their own fault. If they were smarter they obeyed.”¹⁸⁹

Irma Grese generously admitted to her counsel that she carried a whip in Birkenau when she was one of seven *Aufseherinnen* on duty to oversee 30,000 inmates of the women’s camp. When asked by her counsel, Major Cranfield, if the whip hurt she replied “oh yes” and agreed that had it not hurt it would have been of little use.¹⁹⁰ She went on to say that although Kramer prohibited the whips after eight days of use, she continued using it because it was helpful in her work.

When pressed to explain when and why she used the homemade whip she gave the following answer:

In the beginning I did not use anything at all. Later on when the crowds became bigger and bigger then a sort of general stealing started and very much was stolen. So it was with the whole camp and the prisoners did not obey any orders. I gave orders, quite light orders and even those were not obeyed. Every day for instance two *Aufseherinnen* who were working in the kitchen came complaining that things have been stolen. Again margarine had disappeared. I could not know, of course, who were the thieves so therefore, I put two *Aufseherinnen* in charge and I gave them orders to keep their eyes open and whenever they found somebody on the spot who stole something to give them a good thrashing. In the beginning every prisoner had two blankets, but later of course when the crowds became bigger I had to see that everybody got a blanket and therefore, each prisoner only got one blanket. We had about 30,000 blankets in camp “C” but then later on, when one day we wanted to see how many there were I found out that only about half their number was available. I, of course, was responsible for them, and had to go account for where the others had gone.¹⁹¹

The lengthy response provides an in-depth answer to a simple question. For Grese, the conditions are the explanation for the use of violence. For those who had not experienced Birkenau as a daily workplace, the answer was unclear. Unsatisfied by her response, her defense counsel restated the question: “I want you to state for the court on what occasions you struck prisoners and the reasons why you did it.” He then urged her, “Do not be too long winded about it either.” It is difficult to determine if his warning was given out of concern that she not provide further

¹⁸⁹ PRO, WO 235/15, p. 219.

¹⁹⁰ PRO, WO 235/15, p. 24.

¹⁹¹ PRO, WO 235/15, p. 24.

evidence against herself, or if he, like many others, was simply annoyed with the slow pace of the trial. Frustrated, Grese again tried to explain:

That is what I am telling you. We found they had cut up those blankets and made all sorts of things out of them. They had made shoes, little jackets, all sorts of clothing, even small carpets for their beds... And I gave the strictest orders that all those things which had been made out of blankets had to be returned at once. In spite of my strict orders the result was nothing. I did not get anything at all. So then I ordered the control of all the blocks and personal searches of the prisoners. On these occasions I used my whip.¹⁹²

Grese attempted to provide the context for her actions based on the reality of the camp as her workplace. She was responsible for the blankets and the prisoners, thus she owned her actions connected with this task. Grese admitted, “I have beaten prisoners, but I have not ill-treated them...”¹⁹³ Her comments reflected an acceptance of workplace violence, now woefully out of place. When questioned by Backhouse, Grese agreed that she was never given orders to beat prisoners, but, in fact, *gave* orders to those below her to do so because she “had the right and authority to see that the camp for which I was responsible and of which I was the leader, should be put in order.”¹⁹⁴ Her ownership and candor are striking. She did not understand that these explanations seemed like nonsense and made her appear even more criminal, nor did she understand the gravity of claiming personal responsibility at such a moment. The SS men on trial were far more skilled at distancing themselves from their actions. They admitted less, explained less, and did not provided excess detail if not specifically asked.¹⁹⁵

Frieda Walter, who formerly worked in one of Belsen’s kitchens, was told by her defense counsel, Captain Phillips, that she was accused of striking an inmate:

Phillips: Alexandra Siwidowa states that you hit her?

Walter: Naturally, with my hand.

Phillips: Did it hurt her?

¹⁹² PRO, WO 235/15, p. 24.

¹⁹³ PRO, WO 235/15, p. 24.

¹⁹⁴ PRO, WO 234/15, p 138.

¹⁹⁵ PRO, WO 234/15, p. 296-297.

Walter: Certainly.

Phillips: Why did you do it?

Walter: She stole potatoes, just as all the others did.

Phillips: Is it true, as she says, that you hit people with a spade and wooden implements?

Walter: No.

Phillips: Did you ever hit any of the others in the *Kommado* with your hand?

Walter: Yes, the others got their beatings just in the same way as this woman who accuses me of it. Seven or eight had also stolen potatoes and I told them they should leave them, and then the *Kapo* searched and found that they had the potatoes. I told them to fall out and slapped their faces for them.

Cross-examined by Backhouse: What right had you to strike these women at all?

Walter: None.

Backhouse: Why did you do it?

Walter: Because they were stealing, and that was prohibited.

Backhouse: Did any of them ever hit you back?

Walter: No. They would never have dared to because they were prisoners.

Backhouse: You just took advantage of the fact that they knew they dared not hit you back?

Walter: No, that was their punishment because they were stealing.

Backhouse: You had no right to punish them at all, but you took upon yourself to beat them?

Walter: Yes.

Backhouse: Is that how you were trained?

Walter: No.¹⁹⁶

This exchange exemplifies much of the courtroom performance of the *Aufseherinnen* on trial.

Rather than deny her behavior, Walter owned her actions and offered a simplistic explanation

based on the demands of her job and a reality that no longer existed. Like many others, she

admitted to striking prisoners with her hand, though she denied the use of instruments such as a

spade.¹⁹⁷ Interestingly, she denied that she was instructed in violence during her training. On

many occasions Backhouse asked the former *Aufseherinnen* if they were taught to beat prisoners

during their training course. He meant to establish that theirs was a violent order. Had they

answered “yes”, it would have removed some of the personal responsibility from them and

placed it on the larger system. Instead, they answered truthfully that it had not been part of their

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 253.

¹⁹⁷ A few admitted to using sticks to keep from touching prisoners infected with disease. Others admitted to striking but not to such an extent that they knocked out teeth or rendered prisoners unconscious. See PRO, WO 235/15, p. 395.

official training. As shown in chapter one, they did learn this behavior, but it was not officially taught to them. All of the former *Aufseherinnen* questioned stated that they were not trained to strike prisoners, but did so of their own accord. Their misplaced honesty and lack of savvy thinking hurt their defense. It is also an interesting comparison that the SS men on trial were not asked similar questions about their training.

While they openly admitted to striking prisoners when they reasoned it was necessary, most former *Aufseherinnen* on trial denied seeing any other *Aufseherinnen* exhibit similar behavior. Each was asked by their defense counsel if they witnessed other guards beating prisoners and each denied it, thus failing to normalize their actions within the context of camp conditions. Gertrud Fiest admitted to striking prisoners when she lost her patience with them, but told Backhouse that she never saw prisoners in Belsen or other camps beaten by anyone else.¹⁹⁸ It is not surprising that they are dishonest, it is, however, quite unexpected that they lie about violence used by others and not themselves. Given that the *Aufseherinnen* exhibited no esprit de corps, it is unlikely that they were dishonest out of loyalty to their group or to personal friendships, but rather they withheld information out of a misguided sense of what would incriminate them. For similar reasons some even lied about seeing dead bodies around the camp or hearing shooting.¹⁹⁹ Many of these women were so naive that they did not understand what to lie about.

In addition to missing opportunities to normalize their behavior by implicating others, former *Aufseherinnen* frequently failed to notice when their defense counsel attempted to lead them to advantageous answers. Juana Bormann's counsel asked her if she looked very similar to another *Aufseherin* she served with who was not arrested at Belsen and was currently missing.

¹⁹⁸ PRO, WO 234/15, p. 399.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 388.

He asked if they were alike in height or build, if their faces looked similar. He even asked if they worked together and were seen by prisoners at the same time. It is obvious he meant to suggest that those who identified Bormann might have mistaken her for this other woman, and that perhaps the other woman was responsible for what Bormann was now accused. Simple Juana Bormann missed this strategy entirely, and answered repeatedly and definitively that they looked nothing alike and were never mistaken for each other.²⁰⁰

Herta Ehlert's responses show partial understanding of her situation. The prosecution repeatedly asked if she "liked" being in charge of prisoners. She stated that she did not like it and that she "passed very dark and heavy hours" thinking about the treatment of prisoners.²⁰¹ Encouraged by her reflection, Backhouse suggested that prisoners were treated very badly. To this Ehlert responded, "They had everything they were entitled to in the way of food, beds, sanitation, and washing facilities, but on the other hand, they were treated very, very severely." Ehlert could not realize her answers were contradictory.²⁰² She did state that she was transferred from Ravensbrück to Lublin for not showing enough severity with prisoners, an admission that won her some sympathy with Backhouse.

Many women resisted the badgering by the prosecution though the same impulse that made them miss the cues of their own counsel: they simply did not see another layer. However, much to her own disadvantage, Irma Grese was unable to resist the prodding of the prosecution and frequently met his condescension with her own wit and arrogance. When the prosecution asked whether she was the only guard who beat prisoners against the regulations, Grese stated that she did not know. Those previously questioned had answered in the affirmative, so losing patience Backhouse pressed Grese further to why she did not know.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 234.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 234-235.

Backhouse: Did you go around with your eyes shut?

Grese: On the contrary, I had my eyes always open.

Backhouse: Did you ever see other prisoners beaten?

Grese: Yes.

Backhouse: Then why keep saying 'I don't know' when you are asked if they did?

Grese: Maybe they got perhaps an order to beat; I cannot say; I cannot know.

Backhouse: That is not what you were asked. You knew quite well what you were asked. I asked whether you saw anyone else beating prisoners in Auschwitz and you said 'I do not know.'

Grese: No, you asked me if the other were beating in spite of contrary orders, in spite of being prohibited to beat. My answer was, therefore, I do not know because I do not know whether maybe they got an order for that particular purpose.²⁰³

It was one of many heated exchanges Grese had with the prosecution. The opening comments demonstrate the frustrations of both the prosecution and the accused. After 24 days, the trial was just at its midway point. When confronted by the sarcasm of Backhouse, she responded in kind rather than answering with a submissive or helpful reply. Grese displayed an arrogance and poise not found among her fellow defendants. The next day she returned to the stand for another six hours of questioning after only sleeping for 45 minutes the previous night. Backhouse asked about the amount of time she spent on the punishment *Kommado* in Birkenau. Grese reminded him that she had already answered this question the previous day. Backhouse replied, "I know you told us yesterday. You see I am suggesting you did not tell us the truth yesterday." Grese shot back "I have sworn to tell the truth and that is what I have been doing."²⁰⁴ Then Backhouse suggested she had a dog. Grese denied it and stated that she should have known better than anyone whether she had a dog or not. Finally, Backhouse stated that a former inmate accused her of kicking prisoners because it was Grese's "favorite habit." Grese answered that perhaps it was the inmate's "favorite habit to lie."²⁰⁵ And so it continued for hours. When addressed by her defense counsel she gave too much information and provided explanations that made little sense

²⁰³ Ibid., 137.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 132.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 136.

to the outside world. When confronted by the prosecution, she either did not understand or did not care that her answers and attitude were detrimental to her case. The *Daily Herald* wrote of her, “She has been tempestuous. She has been calm. She has been everything but 21, which is her age.”²⁰⁶ Perhaps that is exactly what she was, 21 and wholly unprepared to be a defendant in one of the most important war crimes trials of the twentieth century.

Media Attention

From the beginning, the *Aufseherinnen* of Belsen were a curiosity. The media was fascinated by these women who manned the concentration camps. Their femaleness and their aberrance from female gender expectations was of much public interest. This fascination resulted in a disproportionate amount of coverage of female defendants. Occasionally, a male defendant was reported for appearing uneasy or not paying attention, but it was the women who drew media attention for their appearance, their reactions- a smile, a scream, a swoon- and it was their crimes that were recounted for public consumption. In this way, their role and power within the camp was inflated, and because there was novelty to women perpetrating violence, their acts of brutality made headlines, while those of their male colleagues did not.²⁰⁷ Any enduring image of the *Aufseherinnen* was shaped by these reports.

Even before the trial began, *Aufseherinnen* were featured in news stories about the liberation of Belsen. On April 19, 1945 the *News Chronicle* of London ran the story “The Kind

²⁰⁶Maurice Fagence, “Laughed when accused of Hair-curl Trickery,” *Daily Herald* (London), 17 October 1945, p.3.

²⁰⁷With the exception of Kramer, who as featured in the media at the “Beast of Belsen” for his role in administering the camp, but not for personal acts of brutality.

of Woman Who Staffed Concentration Camps.”²⁰⁸ It covered the arrest of the camp staff in Belsen. The article focused on their appearance and their cruelties. They are described as “mediocre” and “nondescript”, yet evil. Though the uniforms of the *Aufseherinnen* were not impressive, their boots were mentioned four times in the short piece. Perhaps because jackboots were so frequently associated with the male Nazi image, when worn by women their appearance signified an aberrance.²⁰⁹ The author further described the *Aufseherinnen*, saying:

The pasty-faced girl, a great flopping, fat middle-aged woman, women whose faces showed marks of cruelty, others showing merely the callousness of animal stupidity, and half a dozen trim, alert young women, handsome in the way some Nazi young men are handsome with hysterical magnetised vitality.²¹⁰

This early description brands them as cruel, stupid, ugly, and handsome in a masculine way. It suggests that there was something unwomanly about these individuals. The article also described the minds of these women as “cruel” and “twisted”. The author of the article misidentified the women as actual members of the SS rather than contractual employees of the SS, an important distinction lost on most of the postwar world. Perhaps most interesting of all is the closing line of the article: “women prisoners looked straight into the faces of their jackbooted tormentors, their traitor-sisters.”²¹¹ The phrase “traitor-sister” implies a bond of sisterhood among women that should be more powerful than that of political or national allegiance. It means that these *Aufseherinnen* failed as women.

From the early days of the trial, news reports focused on those defendants who were particularly interesting or offensive. Because of his leadership role, Kramer was an obvious

²⁰⁸ Colin Willis, “The Kind of Woman Who Staffed Concentration Camps,” *News Chronicle* (London) 19 April, 1945, p. 3A.

²⁰⁹ This short article references the boots four times “polished jackboots,” “the jackboots were particularly significant,” “kicked them with their polished jackboots,” “jackbooted tormentors.”

²¹⁰ Willis, “The Kind of Woman Who Staffed Concentration Camps,” p. 3A.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

source of attention, yet no other men on trial regularly attracted similar interest. Irma Grese became an early favorite of the press. Even before her actions were described, her looks and demeanor secured her place in the spotlight. The media quickly learned to love to hate the sassy 21 year-old. In fact, almost of the articles written about the trial manage to feature Grese in some capacity. She was quickly dubbed “the beastess of Belsen,” “the blonde beastess,” “the blonde monster,” and “the queen of Belsen.” The day before the trial began she was misidentified as the leader of Belsen’s women. Though Grese held no significant position during her brief time in Belsen, headlines listed her alongside Kramer, thus inflating her role in the camp’s leadership and ascribing to her status and power her own male superiors would have found laughable.

The media were also eager for the *Aufseherinnen* to show signs of remorse or distress, but were equally pleased to report when they defied expected and appropriate behavior. Reports from the first day of the trial noted that all defendants appeared frightened and confused. The *Daily Herald* reported that Herta Ehlert almost fainted and began to cry after the charges were read.²¹² These articles expressed satisfaction in the fear and grief of the accused. Coverage from the second day of the trial noted a difference in atmosphere. Now that the defendants were provided a German translation of the proceedings, they no longer appeared frightened. One headline read “Beast Dozes and Blonde Irma Titivates, Herta Smiles Now.”²¹³ Noted previously for crying, Ehlert now made headlines for briefly smiling- once during the nine hour session. Reports expressed outrage that while the conditions of Belsen were described for the court, Kramer fell asleep then later scribbled some notes; meanwhile Grese “titivated her blonde curls.”²¹⁴ The description of Grese playing with her hair like a bored schoolgirl paints her as

²¹² The Daily Herald, “Living, Dying, Dead All Together, September 18, 1945, p. 1.

²¹³ “Beast Dozes, Blonde Irma Titivates, Herta Smiles Now,” Daily Herald (London), 19 September 1945, p.

1.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

frivolous and cold, but in very gendered terms. Another paper referred to her as “the little blonde” who “glared unwaveringly at all.”²¹⁵ The media was not only fascinated by Grese, but also by her hair and clothing. The front page of the *Daily Worker* featured an article and two photographs from the first day of the trial. The first pictured Kramer and its caption read “Labeled ‘No. 1’ Josef Kramer the beast of Belsen as he faced his judges yesterday.”²¹⁶ The second featured former *Aufseherinnen* and its caption read “Seated together are the female of the species with Irma Grese ‘the blonde beastess’ No. 9 in the centre. This chief woman S.S. guard at Belsen has just had her hair permed.”²¹⁷ Later, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that when a witness described Grese as wearing her hair pinned up while in Birkenau, “She whisked her locks about, trying to claim a hair style was sufficient to discredit the witness.”²¹⁸ The language of frivolity is striking.

Grese’s appearance was further highlighted and used again to provide a meaningful contrast when the court traveled to the former site of the Belsen camp. After only a few days it was clear that there was confusion over the geography of Belsen, and so on the sixth day the entire court, including the defendants and 150 press correspondents, convened in Belsen. The press noted the heavy security that surrounded the former staff as well as the dress and appearance of only one defendant, Irma Grese. According to the *Daily Herald*, she wore a “beautiful pair of silk stockings” and “a neat pair of leather shoes” so nice that “not many

²¹⁵ “Kramer Beams, Takes Notes,” *Daily Worker* (London), 19 September 1945, p. 4.

²¹⁶ “British Victim to Accuse the Beast,” *Daily Worker* (London) 18 September 1945, p.1.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ “Belsen Blonde Lashes Back at Prosecutor: Irma Grese Give Angry Replies at Trial,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 18 October 1945, p. 8.

women would have refused them.”²¹⁹ Her fine clothing was meant to be an offensive contrast with their location; amid the ruin of Belsen walked Irma Grese in her fancy leather shoes.²²⁰

During the visit to Belsen, the press was also interested in the behavior of another female defendant, Ida Forster. When the middle-aged woman struggled to keep up with the group as they walked through the camp, it was suggested that Forster be dragged by two policewomen to finish the tour. To the disappointment of those observing, and the readers of the article, she was allowed to ride in an ambulance.²²¹ The press labeled her lucky to have such treatment, though it clearly believed she deserved to suffer.

The specific accusations against the *Aufseherinnen* were also disproportionately featured in press coverage of the trial. The *Daily Worker* provided general descriptions of the conditions of Belsen, but noted in bold and larger print that many of the *Aufseherinnen* mentioned in the Auschwitz charge “regularly set hounds on the prisoners who were torn to pieces slowly.”²²² Another article from the *Daily Worker* reported in bold that Irene Haschke drowned women in the cistern at Belsen.²²³ The *Daily Herald* reported the false accusation that Ilse Forster beat a woman to death in Auschwitz.²²⁴ And in the United States a *New York Times* headline reported “Belsen Tortures by Woman Listed.”²²⁵ The press coverage also ascribed feelings of enjoyment

²¹⁹ Mea Allan, “Handcuffed ‘Beast’ Goes to Belsen” *Daily Herald* (London), 22 September 1945, p. 1. Also mentioned in “The Belsen Beast Taken Back to Death Camp,” *Daily Worker* (London), 22 September 1945, p.1.

²²⁰ Irma Grese was one of the few female defendants who did not appear in her former uniform, but had a change of clothes, perhaps provided by her younger sister who cycled 60 miles from Lübeck for the trial. Helene Grese was called by the defense to testify as a character witness for her sister. Irma Grese was one of the few defendants to have family testify on their behalf. Grese was one of five children, her mother died when she was 13, and her father disowned her. Certainly she did not come from means. The fine clothing she appeared in was probably not easily acquired. Though perhaps provided by her sister to help her case, the clothes only served to draw further negative attention to Irma Grese.

²²¹ Mea Allan, “Handcuffed ‘Beast’ Goes to Belsen,” *Daily Herald* (London), 22 September 1945, p. 1.

²²² “British Victim to Accuse the Beast,” *Daily Worker* (London) 18 September 1945, p.1.

²²³ “Hysterics in the Belsen Dock,” *Daily Worker* (London), 28 September 1945, p. 4.

²²⁴ “British Rush New Defense For Beast,” *Daily Herald* (London), 25 September 1945, p. 1.

²²⁵ “Belsen Tortures by Woman Listed,” *New York Times*, 27 September 1945, p. 12.

of violence to female defendants. Referring to Grese, “This specimen of Nazi youth derived a special pleasure from whipping her victims and turning savage dogs loose on them.”²²⁶

The inflated status of the *Aufseherinnen* was apparent when the press reported the verdicts of the trial. The *Sunday Times* of November 18, 1945 proclaimed “Kramer and Grese to be Hanged, Death for 11 Belsen Murderers.”²²⁷ The article noted that Kramer and 29 of his associates were found guilty; among them it listed in bold type “Irma Grese, the 22 year-old S.S. guard accused of mass murder and whipping internees, Elizabeth Volkenrath, 26, the chief woman supervisor at Belsen, Juana Bormann, 42, the former religious fanatic who incited her Alsatian dog to attack the internees.”²²⁸ The article then listed in smaller type the SS men who were found guilty, along with a short description of their crimes. For most of the men, this was their first and only mention in the press despite the fact that their crimes were similar to or worse than those of the former *Aufseherinnen* who had been discussed in the news throughout the time of the trial. There was some surprise that the women sentenced to death remained composed as they received the sentence, though the papers noted they sobbed later.²²⁹ Not even known by their names, only their crimes, an article from the *Washington Post* declared “‘Beast of Belsen,’ Girl Sadist Dies on Gallows with Nine Others, ‘Dog Woman’ Dies”²³⁰ The continued media attention inflated their status and secured their crimes in the collective consciousness of the postwar world.

²²⁶ “Verdict on Belsen,” *New York Times*, 19 November, 1945, p. 20.

²²⁷ “Kramer and Grese to be Hanged, Death for 11 Belsen Murderers,” *Sunday Times*, 18 November 1945, p.1.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ “Kramer and Grese to be Hanged, Death for 11 Belsen Murderers,” *Sunday Times* (London), 18 November 1945, p.1. and “Only One Scene when Belsen Accused are Sentenced,” *Manchester Guardian*, 19 November 1945, p. 1.

²³⁰ “‘Beast of Belsen,’ Girl Sadist Die on Gallows with Nine Others, ‘Dog Woman’ Dies,” *Washington Post*, 15 December, 1945, p.1.

The German Press

It is not surprising that German press coverage was not fixated on the presence of women guards in the camps. This had been known to Germans all along. A newsreel produced for German audiences used the same stock footage as the United News segment that opened this chapter. Significantly, the German voice over does not label the women as “savage as the men,” or comment on them at all. Irma Grese is identified, but only as blonde and adroit.²³¹ There was more interest in the Ravensbrück trial among Germans, than that of Belsen, which was evidenced by more press coverage of Ravensbrück than Belsen.

The coverage of the Ravensbrück trial among the German press was much more straightforward.²³² An article from the Berlin *Telegraf*, “Binder Musste Blut Sehen” focused on the conditions of Ravensbrück in general. Though Binz is mentioned, it is a male guard whose crime makes the headline. The article quoted a witness who accused Binz of hitting her on the head and throwing a bucket of cold water on her, and another witness mentioned the long *appells* Binz conducted. The actions of Binz were presented alongside those of her male colleagues.²³³ Additionally, there were fewer photographs accompanying these articles than there were in the English press. Those that did feature pictures of the defendants offered basic captions that treated the female and male defendants with similar language.²³⁴ When the trial ended, the verdicts were announced in the papers by listing the names and sentences without any description of specific crimes.²³⁵

²³¹ *Welt im Film*, no. 26, *Belsen and Nuremberg*, 35mm, 2.57 min., (Office of Military Government and Control Commission for Germany), Imperial War Museum, WIF 26/2.

Belsen Death Camp Leaders Meet Justice, 35mm, 1.15 min., (Office of War Information: United News, 1945), National Archives and Records Administration, 208 UN 176.

²³² “Der Tod vn Ravensbruck Beginn des Prozess,” *Die Welt* (Hamburg) 7 December 1946, p. 1.

²³³ “Binder Musste Blut Sehen,” *Telegraf* (Berlin) 11 December, 1946, p. 2.

²³⁴ “Versuchsobjekt Mensch,” *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 1946, p. 2.

²³⁵ “Urteile Ravensbruck,” *Telegraf* (Berlin) 3 February 1947, p.1.

Verdicts

It is to the credit of the Allies that they invested so much time and effort into the series of postwar trials, both in pursuit of civilized justice, and in search of answers to the how and why of the Nazi state. The individuals assigned as defense counsel were faced with a difficult and perhaps distasteful undertaking. Yet, throughout both the Belsen and Ravensbrück trials these men did remarkable work. They made sophisticated legal arguments concerning the civilian status of the *Aufseherinnen*, which they argued should have excluded them from military trial and the charge of a war crime. They questioned unreliable evidence, presented explanations that starving prisoners were difficult to control, and noted that in Belsen the conditions were not the concerted act of anyone at all, let alone the accused. They argued that because there were relatively few defendants to attribute the crimes to, prisoners might have been tempted to ascribe guilt to those put before them.

In their closing statements defense counsel appealed to female gender stereotypes with the hope of stirring the sympathy of the court. Major Munro argued that Anna Hempel struck kitchen workers in Belsen because she was a woman who was agitated and anxious because food was not cooked properly. He also reminded the court that she was a married woman who had a child.²³⁶ Munro described Juana Bormann as a “small and very frail woman,” and as such it was “inconceivable” that she could inflict the violent punishments on prisoners of which she was accused.²³⁷ Major Cranfield argued that because Grese was prettier than most women, prisoners might have falsely accused her out of jealousy of her good looks. Dr. Beyer, the counsel for Binz, argued that she was forced into a leadership position when she was too young and put in “a

²³⁶ PRO, WO 234/15, 527.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

position for which she was no match mentally.”²³⁸ Although throughout the trials the former *Aufseherinnen* were disadvantaged because of the gender expectations of women, now when their own defense sought access to the same stereotypes, it proved ineffective.

The defense did their best to insure a fair trial to those accused. Despite their best efforts, most of the defendants at the Belsen trial were found guilty. Of those tried at Belsen 11 were sentenced to death, and one to life imprisonment; five received 15 years, nine received ten years, two received five years, one received three years, one received one year.²³⁹ Fourteen were acquitted. Though they made up fewer of the overall staff of Belsen, 84 percent of female defendants were found guilty, compared to only 50 percent of male defendants.²⁴⁰

Table 1 Findings of the Belsen Trial

Name	Finding	Sentence	Released
Juana Bormann	Guilty	Death	
Elizabeth Volkenrath	Guilty	Death	
Irma Grese	Guilty	Death	
Herta Ehlert	Guilty	15 years	1953
Ilse Lothe	Not Guilty		
Hilde Lohbauer*	Guilty	10 years	1950
Ilse Forster	Guilty	10 years	1951
Ida Forster	Not Guilty		Died while on trial

²³⁸PRO, WO 234/302, p. 50.

²³⁹ After the sentences were announced the Under Secretary of State was petitioned by two French organizations to protest the leniency of the sentencing. They demanded a retrial allowing for French survivors of Auschwitz and Belsen to attend in the hopes that all defendants would be sentenced to death. They believed an example must be set for the German people who did not understand British justice. The request was denied and included in the response “It does not seem to occur to many Frenchman that their own administration of justice recently has made the worst impression on world opinion.” WO 235/23 Memo November 30, 1945.

²⁴⁰ Phillips, p. 644.

Klara Opitz	Not Guilty		
Charlotte Klein	Not Guilty		
Herta Bothe	Guilty	10 years	1951
Frieda Walter	Guilty	3 years	1948
Irene Haschke	Guilty	10 years	1951
Gertrud Fiest	Guilty	5 years	1949
Gertrud Sauer	Guilty	10 years	1951
Hilde Lisiewitz	Guilty	1 year	1946
Johanne Roth*	Guilty	10 years	1950
Anna Hempel	Guilty	10 years	1951
Helen Kopper*	Guilty	15 years	1952
Stanislawa Starostka*	Guilty	10 years	1950
*Denotes Prisoner Functionary			

At the Ravensbrück trial, all defendants were found guilty. It is likely the verdicts were a reaction to the negative public response to the verdicts of the Belsen trial, where 14 were acquitted.

Table 2 Findings of the Ravensbrück Trial

Name	Finding	Sentence	Released
Dorothea Binz	Guilty	Death	
Greta Bösel	Guilty	Death	
Eugenia von Skene*	Guilty	10 years	1951
Margaret Mews	Guilty	10 years	1952

Carmon Mory*	Guilty	Death	Committed Suicide in Prison
Vera Salvaquart*	Guilty	Death	
Elisabeth Marschall**	Guilty	Death	
*Denotes Prisoner Functionary **Denotes Nurse			

Appeals

After sentencing, the defendants had two weeks to file an appeal of their initial sentence. Interestingly, tactics used in these appeals did not vary greatly between women and men. Both appealed on the basis of their youth, orders of superiors, and faults in the legal procedure of their trial. Later appeals filed for reduced time cited family obligations and personal suffering, and had letters written on their behalf to attest to their moral character and Christian values. Most, were eventually successful as few served their entire sentence. As the years passed so did the energy for punishing war criminals. By the mid-1950s most of those convicted in the early rounds of postwar trials were released.²⁴¹ In this way, it was the few who were initially executed who bore the weight of the world's justice.

Of the *Aufseherinnen* sentenced to death in the Belsen trial, only Irma Grese appealed. Major Cranfield argued there had been legal flaws in the procedure against her and that too much weight was given to hearsay evidence. He noted that she was very young and had come of age under the Nazi rule. Her appeal was denied. Similarly Dr. Beyer argued again that Binz's young age should be considered. He argued that as someone so young in charge of so many women she was unsure of herself and that her "rigor" resulted from "her internal insecurity as a superior and

²⁴¹ PRO, WO 235/22, "Clemency Remission Grants," p.88

does not perhaps result from a sadistic and brutal inclination.”²⁴² He correctly pointed out that though Binz was the *Oberaufseherin*, she did not have the full authority that the male leadership possessed, and that members of that leadership were unable to be found and brought to trial. As a result, she appeared as a more powerful leader rather than a subordinate. Thus, he said, “she shall ascend the scaffold for the crimes” of those missing leaders.²⁴³ Similar to the strategy he and the defense counsel at Belsen employed, Beyer closed his appeal by writing, “I also request to regard the condemned as a young girl, who offended heavily, but not deserved capital punishment.”²⁴⁴ Beyer tried to invoke the sentiment and perhaps protective feelings society held toward young girls. He was unsuccessful.

Later appeals for reduced time lacked these gendered qualities. Frieda Walter successfully requested that her three year sentence be reduced because she had already served half of her time, during which she had become ill. She also noted that she had lost all of her belongings. Irene Haschke, Herta Bothe, and Hilde Liesewitz appealed that they had been in Belsen a very short time and thus bore only a small responsibility for its conditions. They argued that their time already served was sufficient punishment. Gertrud Fiest appealed that her sentence be mitigated because her parents were elderly and frail and unable to work. She requested that she be released to help care for them.²⁴⁵ One male guard charged at Ravensbrück had his wife write a letter on his behalf asking that his sentence be reduced because he was a father of two young children.²⁴⁶ The wife of another man, convicted at Belsen, wrote asking for her husband’s release because she was old and unable to work. She claimed she and her children were always hungry and without food. Stating that her husband did not feel guilty, it was unjust that he be

²⁴² PRO, WO 235/312, p. 73.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ PRO, WO 235/23 “Appeal Memo” 1946, Gertrud Fiest to Military Tribunal.

²⁴⁶ PRO, WO 235/312, p. 49.

imprisoned for 15 years. The poor woman closed by threatening to kill herself and her children if her husband's release could not be secured.²⁴⁷ Later Haschke was able to have letters written by her former neighbors and employers to attest to her good character and lack of political interest.²⁴⁸ She also had her foster-father write on her behalf attesting to her good character, stating that Haschke's five year old daughter urgently needed her mother.²⁴⁹

The petitions and appeals filed for the former *Aufseherinnen* are a reminder that these women had lives before and after their camp service. Despite their actions within the camp system, there was more to them than those years or what the public saw on trial.

Conclusion

The *Aufseherinnen* tried at the Belsen and Ravensbrück trials to explain their actions and their time in the camps to the best of their abilities. They were not sophisticated or savvy thinkers and their misplaced honesty often earned them harsher sentences. These female defendants faced the disadvantage of their own ill-preparedness coupled with that of the court's bias against women criminals. Additionally, they faced greater scrutiny by the press and saw their actions preserved in notoriety. Yet, it is through these very trials that their own voices were heard. Not before or after would their perspective be presented. From their own testimony we learn that they freely admitted to using violence against prisoners, though they saw this violence as a means to do their job, not the job itself. We learn of the pressures and challenges facing the *Aufseherinnen* in their workplace. And we more fully understand how these ordinary women were involved in the perpetration of genocide. As one attorney aptly summarized, "These were factory girls who

²⁴⁷ PRO, WO 235/22 "Petition for Clemency" He was released five years after his wife's petition and five years short of his original sentence.

²⁴⁸ PRO, WO 235/23

²⁴⁹ PRO, WO 235/23, "Petition for Clemency" She was released four years later, and four years short of her original sentence.

had been given a uniform and told to control internees, but were charged on the same charge-sheet as the Kommandant of the Belsen camp.”²⁵⁰

Ladies First

On the morning of December 13, 1945 at 9:34 a.m., Elizabeth Volkenrath, followed by Irma Grese and Juana Bormann became the first individuals to be executed by the West for the crimes of the Nazi system. They were buried in the prison cemetery at Hameln Prison. In 1954, their bodies were exhumed and re-interred in a mass grave outside of Hannover.²⁵¹ Though they died in 1945, the image of the *Aufseherinnen* did not. The extensive press coverage and public notoriety of these “Belsen women,” and particularly of Irma Grese, imprinted a false representation of the *Aufseherinnen* on the collective consciousness. Though their historical role in the camps was eclipsed and soon forgotten, a distorted likeness of them would surface again and again.

²⁵⁰ PRO, WO 235/15, p. 134.

²⁵¹ In 1993 the former prison was renovated into a four-star hotel.

CHAPTER FOUR

Irma, Ilsa, Elsa: Recasting the *Aufseherin*

“Would it please you?” the words drip seductively from the lipsticked mouth of Irma Grese. Her manicured red nails coil comfortably around a pistol aimed at a young girl’s head. The handsome version of Dr. Mengele coolly shakes his head “no” and the screen crackles with a dark sexuality.²⁵² In the years following the end of the war and the war crimes trials, the historical reality of the *Aufseherinnen* faded, replaced by a cultural imagination of the sexy, sadistic SS woman, as typified in the 2008 Showtime drama. Though largely absent for decades from historical study, fictional images and representations of the *Aufseherinnen* emerged. Such representations are uninterested in the women themselves, but use them as a highly gendered vehicle to express evil, deviance, and cruelty and often as a means to enjoy gratuitous violence against women.

This chapter addresses representations found in the mainstream films *Out of the Ashes*, *The Reader*, and *Playing for Time*, and it will show the influence of the genre of Nazisploitation films, as characterized by *Ilsa She-Wolf of the SS*, on these depictions and on current conceptions of the *Aufseherinnen*. It will also demonstrate that media coverage of postwar trials influenced the iteration of *Aufseherinnen* in popular culture. The films addressed stress adherence to some female gender norms and marked deviance from others. As is often the case for women on screen, these cinematic *Aufseherinnen* are frequently reduced to essential roles- the sexual or the maternal. Rather than communicate the reality of the *Aufseherinnen* and the conceptual space they lacked during the Third Reich, such reductions and representations re-imagine or recast these women to fit the very gender roles they defied. An examination of this process and

²⁵²*Out of the Ashes*, Showtime 2003.

transformation shows that they were subject to discrimination, exploitation, and obfuscation; theirs is the story of many women on-screen and off. It is possible to see the progression from real-life Irma, to exploitation Ilsa, to mainstream Elsa. Then the process reverses itself: films depict Irma Grese and other *Aufseherinnen* by employing representations forged by “Nazisploitation”.

Historiography of Holocaust Film

Though we live in a time saturated by cultural representations of Nazis and the Holocaust, it is important to remember that for many decades following the war this was not the case. War movies featured Nazis in a context of battle and war, but not within the context of the Holocaust. This aspect of the war, which distinguished the Nazis and the Second World War in Europe, was more of a footnote than a recognized, studied event. Historian Tony Judt states that “In retrospect, ‘Auschwitz’ is the most important thing to know about World War Two. But that is not how things seemed at the time.”²⁵³ Indeed that is not how things seemed for a good long while and with a few noted exceptions, such as *Night and Fog* and *The Pawnbroker*, cinema followed this general trend as well.²⁵⁴ It was decades before film ventured out of the safe territory of war and postwar allusions to the concentration camps and tentatively moved toward depicting the Holocaust itself, especially in American cinema.²⁵⁵ Those that did focused on postwar justice.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), p. 821.

²⁵⁴ Alain Resnais, *Night and Fog* (France: Argros Films, 1955) and M. Landau, P. Langner, R. Lewis, H. Steinmann, and S. Lumet, *The Pawnbroker* (United States: Landau co., 1964).

²⁵⁵ C.J. Picart, *The Holocaust Film Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004). Also see Robert C. Reimer and Carol J. Reimer, *Historical Dictionary of Holocaust Cinema* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012)

²⁵⁶ Lawrence Baron, “The First Wave of American “Holocaust” Films, 1945-1959,” *American Historical Review* 115 no. 1 (February 2010): 90-114, p. 92.

The real leap came in April 1978 with the American miniseries *The Holocaust*.²⁵⁷ Over the course of four consecutive nights NBC broadcast this nine and a half hour miniseries to an audience of over 120 million viewers. They advertised the movie heavily and even distributed study guides to teachers and civic and religious organizations.²⁵⁸ The program follows a fictional German Jewish family from 1935-1945. The scope of the film was indeed staggering. It covered the Nuremberg Laws, *Kristallnacht*, the T-4 euthanasia program, ghettoization, execution by mass shooting and gassing, the Wannsee Conference, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the Sobibor uprising, the Allied war crimes trials, and finally survivor immigration to Palestine. Although fictional and primarily concerned with producing a popular film to rival ABC's *Roots*, there was some attempt to base the plot on history and historical actors. However, producers wanted a good story about individuals in extraordinary times, and thus exact historical accuracy or believability was not a top priority. Marketed for the highest commercial impact, it is unlikely that NBC realized the social and cultural importance of the film: they not only succeeded in creating a commercial success, but also in bringing a greater awareness of the Holocaust to millions of Americans.²⁵⁹

In 1993 Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* heightened consciousness further. There were Holocaust films between 1978 and 1993, including Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, but *Schindler's List* was the most powerful in generating interest and altering public memory.²⁶⁰ While *Schindler's List* is partially fictionalized, it represents an attempt to portray the Holocaust from a more historically conscious perspective. Indeed *Schindler's List* and the approaching 50th

²⁵⁷ R. Berger, *Holocaust: TV Miniseries*, (United States: Titus Productions, 1978).

²⁵⁸ Lawrence Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present: Changing Focus of Contemporary Holocaust Cinema* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 51.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 54. For the impact on German speaking audiences see *Heidmarie Uhl*, "Von „Endlösung" zu „Holocaust". Die TV-Ausstrahlung von „Holocaust" und die Transformationen des österreichischen Gedächtnisses," *Historical Social Research* 30 no. 4 (2005): 29-52.

²⁶⁰ Judith E. Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 200.

anniversary of the end of the Second World War marked a turning point in Holocaust film and history. These events promoted additional popular interest in the Holocaust, more survivors' testimonies, and more films focused on the Holocaust.²⁶¹

So pervasive was the imagery of *Schindler's List*, that its impact on Holocaust memory was soon felt. Survivors began to remember their experiences in terms of those shown on screen, either by direct reference- such as describing the commandant they encountered as "just like the one in *Schindler's List*" rather than with an actual description- or by conflating details of their Holocaust experience with those presented in the movie. By the mid-90s there was no longer a dearth of Holocaust films or of interest for this event, and it was clear that film was shaping public memory and imagination of the Holocaust.²⁶²

"Stalag" Fiction

In the years preceding these films, when mainstream culture remained relatively silent on the Holocaust, sections of lowbrow culture, such as "Nazisploitation" films and their print forerunners, "Stalag" fiction, explored Nazi and Holocaust-related themes as early as the 1960s and mid-1970s. Unlike the products of mainstream culture, they did not hesitate to depict and exploit the Nazi/prisoner dynamic. These novels and films combined exploitation methods of excessive violence and gratuitous sexuality with images of the Holocaust. In so doing they violated two social taboos, one regarding cinematic representations of sexuality, and one

²⁶¹ Lynn Rapaport, "Hollywood's Holocaust: *Schindler's List* and the Construction of Memory," *Film and History* 32.1 (May 2002): 55-65. Also see Freda Freiberg, "Haunted by the Past: Ways of Remembering the Holocaust on Film," *Screen Education* no. 43 (2006): 8-13.

²⁶² Ernest van Alphen, "Caught by Images: On the Role of Visual Imprints in Holocaust Testimonies," *Journal of Visual Culture* 1 no. 2 (August 2002): 205-221, p. 219.

regarding the ethical and aesthetic taboo surrounding Nazism and the Holocaust.²⁶³ Images from this genre eventually transferred to the mainstream and influenced popular culture images of Nazis as related to the Holocaust. They were particularly influential in shaping the view of Nazi women and distorting the image of the *Aufseherinnen*.

Emerging within months of the Eichmann Trial of 1961, an event which lent legitimacy to the survivor experience and stirred interest in the Holocaust, “Stalag” fiction became an instant success.²⁶⁴ Most popular in Israel, “Stalag” fiction was erotic pulp fiction. Written exclusively by Israelis, the authors frequently used foreign pseudonyms such as “Mike Baden” and “Victor Boulder” to lend authenticity to their stories. The books also contained the name of a fictitious translator and sometimes for extra believability included banners proclaiming “for the first time in Hebrew.”²⁶⁵ These stories usually depicted captured American and British airmen held captive in POW camps facilitated by female Nazis. These men were tortured and often sexually violated by the Nazi women, but would go on to inspire revolt and revenge among their fellow prisoners. By the novels’ ends the prisoners not only rebel against their captors, but rape and kill them. Much like the “Nazisploitation” films that followed, these novels featured hyper-sexualized “SS women” clad in boots and wielding whips.²⁶⁶ Much attention is given to their physical descriptions. “Stalag” fiction provided its audience with both a satisfying sexual fantasy and a revenge narrative. The first of its kind, *Stalag 13* appeared in four different editions and

²⁶³ Sabine Hake, *Screen Nazis: Cinema, History, and Democracy* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012) 149.

²⁶⁴ Amit Vinchevski and Roy Brand, “Holocaust Perversions: The Stalags Pulp Fiction and the Eichmann Trial,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24 no. 5 (December 2007): 387-407.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p 389.

²⁶⁶ “Stalag” fiction and “Nazisploitation” depict women as members of the SS, rather than contractual employees. Throughout this chapter I will refer to these fictional women as “SS women” rather than *Aufseherinnen* to distinguish the fictional from the historical.

sold over 25,000 copies within its first year.²⁶⁷ Its sequel, *Stalag 217*, sold out within a week. It was advertised as “a true and brutally honest story of the lives of male captives bound by sadistic girls . . . women whose entire essence is based on the brimming lust for the blood of others, for deriving sadistic pleasure from their pain.”²⁶⁸ The descriptions of these fictional “SS women” were not so different from those used by the press in their coverage of the *Aufseherinnen* on trial. Perhaps the most surprising feature of these stories is that while their audience was entirely Jewish, their characters were not. In fact, this lack of Jewishness was a key to their success. Because the victims, and eventual heroes, were Allied prisoners rather than Jewish prisoners, their target audience, Israelis whose parents had survived the Holocaust, had enough distance to enjoy the revenge fantasy without complications.²⁶⁹ It was a tentative first step in the construction of Holocaust representations, and one with a longer reach than perhaps initially recognized.

“Nazisploitation”

Though short-lived, the success of “Stalag” literature spawned its cinematic equivalent in the form of “Nazisploitation”. Though limited and low-brow, “Nazisploitation” warrants mentioning for the following reasons:

1. Its films justify the female body as a site of revenge.
2. Its powerful Nazi women are a contradiction to the historical reality of *Aufseherinnen*.
3. Their sexuality is augmented and vilified.
4. These traits are transmitted to the mainstream entertainment and popular culture.
5. In all cases the stories told are not about the *Aufseherinnen*.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Elizabeth Bridges, Kristen T. Vander Lugt, and Daniel Magilow, eds., *Nazisploitation!: The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 45.

“Nazisploitation” films appeared in the late 1960s and employed a similar formula. Like other exploitation films, “Nazisploitation” films were sought out by audiences for their shock value. Their content heavily relied on themes of power, sexuality and violence. Often cheaply made, these films intended to make the most profit for the least investment, and they had no concern for historical accuracy. The low production value allowed the audience to ignore the poorly developed plots and characters while focusing on the sex and violence found at this intersection of pornography and horror.²⁷⁰ The majority of these films were produced in Italy, Spain, and France, but the model for the “Nazisploitation” formula was based on the American film *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS*.²⁷¹

Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS appeared in 1974. It was both the culmination of the “Stalag” imagery that preceded it and an instrumental model for the transmission of these images to the mainstream. Her appearance and behavior soon became part of the mainstream, popular culture image of the SS *Aufseherinnen*. Set in Poland in the final days of the war, the film tells the story of a brutal female commandant of Medical Camp 9, of her perverted and despotic reign, and of her eventual demise. Ilsa conducts bogus medical experiments on female prisoners to prove women can withstand more pain than men, and thus should be allowed to fight in combat. She also castrates male prisoners who fail to satisfy her sexually.

The film opens by panning slowly across Ilsa’s bedroom. Reflected in the mirror the viewer sees a naked Ilsa atop a male prisoner. After a suggestive shower scene that implies Ilsa is masturbating, the camera cuts to her male companion; he is taken away to be castrated. Most of the film shows Ilsa to be in control, both in bed and in the camp. She and her assistants dominate the men around them, both prisoners and Nazis. In *Ilsa* and other “Nazisploitation” films, the

²⁷⁰ Sabine Hake, *Screen Nazis*, 148.

²⁷¹ David Friedman, Don Edmonds, *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS* (United States: Aeteas Filmproduktions, 1974).

“SS women” grotesquely abuse their positions of authority. Their cruelty serves as the justification for their eventual rape and murder by prisoners. If male guards were featured in these stories, their role was limited and their deaths quick and easy, never sexualized for the audience’s pleasure. As with other exploitation films, these films border on, and sometimes are, pornographic. Their uniqueness lies in their ability to justify extreme sexual violence against women and give their audience permission to enjoy it. Because these women are Nazis, they must deserve their eventual torture. The bulk of the film is dedicated to scenes of torture or torture’s aftermath.²⁷² Blonde, beautiful, busty, sexually perverse, and very cruel, Ilsa’s behavior is horrific enough not only to justify her eventual death, but also to make the audience crave her punishment. This is a feature shared by “Stalag” literature and by the mainstream films inspired by “Nazisploitation”. It is also the most troubling. These tactics promote the female body as an appropriate site of revenge and punishment, and as such allow for the enjoyment of extreme violence, and sexual violence in particular, against women.²⁷³

In marked contrast to the historical reality where *Aufseherinnen* were always outranked by and subordinate to their male colleagues, these films depicted women in control of all aspects of the camp. *Ilsa’s* movie poster boasted that she was “the most dreaded Nazi of them all!” and “She committed crimes so terrible even the SS feared her!” Such a claim is very different from the reality discussed in chapter two. Female overseers were rarely respected by their male colleagues, and never feared by them. The film features several graphic examples of Ilsa and her fellow SS women dominating men, both prisoner and fellow Nazi. While unfounded, this

²⁷² Lynn Rapaport, “Holocaust Pornography: Profaning the Sacred in *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 22 n. 1. (Fall2003): 53-79, 59. Rapaport argues that although the film is considered pornographic, it contains more scenes of torture, 44 in all, than sexuality explicit scenes of which there are only five.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*

portrayal fuels the misconception that camp women were more brutal than their male counterparts, while perpetuating the misperception that these women were operating outside their gender norms. Even the title of the film addresses the otherness of these women: “*She* wolf” of the SS, not simply wolf, but “she wolf” - must be specified. Wolf, like the SS, is masculine; Ilsa, must be marked as different.

The decision to feature *Aufseherinnen* was determined by a number of factors not related to the women themselves, yet the result is nonetheless a comment on them. There is an obvious difference between the historical reality of these women and their screen counterparts. Their fictional representations augment their sexuality and indict Nazi masculinity. The women are in charge of the camp, but they ultimately want to be dominated by worthy males. Their position of power is unnatural to them, and not desired. In this way these films also serve as an overall critique of the Nazi system.²⁷⁴ This female leadership implies that Germany lacked worthy males, and in this way female power highlights male weakness. This is further shown through sexual interactions between the women. Their sexual engagement with each other is caused by the lack of adequate men. When a powerful man appears, they abandon their same-sex activity. This trope of lesbianism is not unique to “Nazisploitation”, but functions here as an attack on German masculinity and an affirmation of patriarchy in general.²⁷⁵ In this way these stories are never really about the *Aufseherinnen*, but rather about the weakness of Nazi men or the Nazi system and a desire to humiliate and dominate its aberrant women.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴ Jean-Pierre Geuens, “Pornography and the Holocaust: The Last Transgression,” *Film Criticism* 20 no.1/2 (Fall95/Winter96): 114-130.

²⁷⁵ Julia Erhart, “From Nazi Whore to Good German Mother: Revisiting Resistance in the Holocaust Film,” *Screen* 41 no. 4 (Winter 2000): 388-403, p. 390.

²⁷⁶ Though “Stalag” fiction and Nazisploitation films are dependent upon the idea of Nazis as sexually deviant, they do not create this phenomenon; such coding was explored almost immediately after the war in Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City*.

The shift from the historical to the fictional only heightened and exploited the sexuality of these women. The film's poster advertises Ilsa as a sexual creature. She is shown with large breasts partially exposed through her unbuttoned shirt. She stands provocatively, and is outfitted in pants. Though she is sexualized, it is an aberrant sexuality, dominant and slightly masculine. It captures these women as the height of both femininity and masculinity. Yet, the filmmakers know this aberration is attractive and use it to market the film. Compare the poster to the photo of Irma Grese. There are similarities, the boots, the hard gaze, and blond hair. It is easy to see inspiration was drawn from this and similar photos of Irma Grese. However, most importantly, we see that the overt changes are designed to sexualize the *Aufseherinnen*.



²⁷⁷ Image from Lion's Gates Films

Despite the actual disregard for historical accuracy, the producer included a disclaimer/dedication at the film's start: "The film you are about to see is based upon documented fact... Although these crimes against humanity are historically accurate, the characters depicted are composites of notorious Nazi personalities... We dedicate this film with the hope that these heinous crimes will never occur again."²⁷⁸ Disingenuously and unbelievably, the producer attempted to heighten the realism of what will soon prove to be very unrealistic.²⁷⁹ However, his mention of creating characters out of real Nazi personalities is not entirely false. As discussed in the previous chapter, the postwar trials gave brief spotlight to those held responsible for the crimes of the Nazi regime- among the most notable, Irma Grese. Much of Ilsa's character was formed, not out of the reality of the *Aufseherinnen*, but from the media's presentation of them and of Grese. Recall that press coverage frequently ascribed feelings of pleasure and enjoyment to violent actions used by the *Aufseherinnen* in the course of their camp duties. Remember also that the crimes of female defendants were repeatedly splashed through the headlines of major papers, while those of their male counterparts were hardly mentioned.²⁸⁰ Irma Grese was blonde, attractive, labeled as sadistic, and displayed confidence and ownership when questioned about her actions. The press persona of Irma is the model for Ilsa. Though as also previously shown, Grese was not the typical *Aufseherinnen*, yet in that crucial moment when the world watched, Grese became the face of the *Aufseherinnen*. The *Aufseherinnen* were quickly forgotten, but the image of Grese remained. She and Ilse Koch were the inspiration for

²⁷⁸ *Ilsa She Wolf of the SS*, opening credits.

²⁷⁹ The claim "based on true events" also helped him circumnavigate the censors and allowed for a wider viewership. Lynn Rapaport, "Holocaust Pornography: Profaning the Sacred in *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*," 57.

²⁸⁰ See again "Belsen Tortures by Woman Listed," *New York Times*, 27 September 1945, p. 12, and "'Beast of Belsen,' Girl Sadist Die on Gallows with Nine Others, 'Dog Woman' Dies," *Washington Post*, 15 December, 1945, p.1, and "Kramer and Grese to be Hanged, Death for 11 Belsen Murderers," *Sunday Times*, 18 November 1945.

Ilsa and the earlier literature.²⁸¹ Koch's 1967 suicide again brought her image and memory of her crimes to public attention, and did so just in time to fuel the emerging genre of "Stalag" fiction and "Nazisploitation".

"Nazisploitation" films were controversial because they used images of violence, suffering, and death to shock and titillate the audience. In many ways the "Nazisploitation" films are not so dissimilar from any film portraying the Holocaust, but these films do not hide what they are about. Rather they deliver the shock and perverse pleasure an audience craves when viewing a film about the Holocaust.²⁸² On some level that is what makes people seek out the Holocaust. They want the grotesque and the depraved. Mainstream, middlebrow films such as *Schindler's List* deliver this in a more tasteful manner, yet still exploit the Holocaust as a source of extreme emotion. In all cases, however, the films presented are not actually about the Holocaust or the women represented.²⁸³

What makes *Ilsa* even more interesting is the knowledge that its producer, David F. Friedman, worked with the US Army Signal Corps which was given the task of filming the liberation and aftermath of many concentration camps. Though Friedman did not experience the camps firsthand, his work supervising movie theaters on army bases and instructing GIs in film production exposed him to this now iconic atrocity footage. Before *Ilsa*, Friedman produced

²⁸¹ Ilse Koch was the wife of Karl-Otto Koch, commandant of Buchenwald and Majdanek. She attracted much public attention for her collection of tattooed human skin taken from prisoners. She and her husband were tried by a Nazi court for murder and embezzlement; Otto was executed, Ilse acquitted. The allies later convicted her for war crimes and she was sentenced to life in prison, though she was released after two years. Public dissatisfaction caused a West German court to retry and convict, again sentencing her to life in prison. Koch committed suicide in 1967. Though she was famous for her cruelty to prisoners, she never held the position of an overseer; rather her authority came from her position as wife to the commandant. Because she was never hired by the government and only accessed prisoners through her role as wife to the commandant, a detailed discussion of Ilse Koch will not be included in this study. However, we must acknowledge that her fame and visibility placed her image and story in the public mind at both the times of her trials and her later suicide.

²⁸² Lynn Rapaport, "Holocaust Pornography: Profaning the Sacred in *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*," p. 79.

²⁸³ Mathew Clayfield, "Beyond Representation?," *Screen Education* no. 69 (Autumn 2013): 114-121, p. 116.

Love Camp 7, an early exploitation film dealing with the same violent and misogynistic themes as his later work.²⁸⁴

Though these films were a short-lived lowbrow phenomenon, they enjoyed great success and a large viewership. *Ilsa* was especially popular. It opened in 1974 in 17 countries around the world, though it was banned in Germany. In the United States it was one of the top 50 grossing films in its opening week, and was reviewed by the *New York Times*. It has made over ten million dollars in box office earnings, and Amazon.com reports its DVD to be a consistent seller.²⁸⁵ Despite its poor quality, it is still shown in theaters around the world, and studied in film classes.²⁸⁶ The influence of this film and its portrayal of “SS women” has been surprisingly pervasive. Mainstream films such as *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and *Out of the Ashes* use imagery and techniques based generally in Nazisploitation and more specifically on *Ilsa*. *Indiana*'s Elsa, the Nazi love interest of Dr. Jones, is a mainstream copy of *Ilsa*. This iteration of a Nazi woman is dressed in the same white silk blouse, jodhpurs, and jackboots that costumed *Ilsa*. She is also blonde, sexually aggressive, and deceptive. Elsa brought *Ilsa* to a whole new audience.

²⁸⁴Daniel H. Magilow, Elizabeth Bridges and Kristin T. Vanderlugt, eds., *Nazisploitation: The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture* (New York: Continuum International, 2012) 11.

²⁸⁵ Rapaport, “Holocaust Pornography,” 72.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*



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The above image compares the action figure of Dr. Elsa Schneider based on the Indiana Jones movie with the depiction of Ilsa. A comparison of this child's toy and the likeness of Ilsa, star of the adult film, is striking, and shows the pervasive nature of the recasting of the Nazi woman. Even if later films were not explicitly aware of what they drew from, they nonetheless perpetuated a particular image of the "SS woman." The next set of films discussed show the transmission of Nazisploitation themes and highlight essentialized cinematic depictions of the *Aufseherinnen*.

²⁸⁷ Image found at <http://www.cooltoyreview.com/photo.asp?image=/Hasbro/IndianaJones/Elsa/Indy-903.jpg>

Out of the Ashes

Showtime's 2003 drama *Out of the Ashes* is a well-intended film that nonetheless draws from "Nazisploitation" imagery and technique. The film is based on the memoir *I was a Doctor in Auschwitz* by Gisella Perl, and chronicles her life during and after the Holocaust. The Hungarian Dr. Perl was sent to Auschwitz in 1944, where she performed thousands of abortions on pregnant prisoners in order to save their lives. As a doctor, she was employed in the camp infirmary, where she witnessed experiments by Dr. Mengele and interacted with Irma Grese. After the war, Perl immigrated to America and underwent a lengthy process to reinstate her medical license and establish that she was not a Nazi collaborator. The film shows both her postwar struggle and, through a series of flashbacks, her time in Auschwitz. Though *Ashes* is intended to be a film concerned with Perl's double victimization- once by the Nazis and again by American bureaucrats- it trades on the prevailing cultural assumptions about the *Aufseherinnen* and reinforces the shallow, sexualized view previously crafted and re-employed in "Nazisploitation" films.

As seen in the short scene that opened this chapter, *Ashes* relies on standard gendered tropes to express the vileness of Grese, and perhaps all female perpetrators. The character of Grese is dressed in high heels and a tight skirt and is very well-kempt. The film's director, Joseph Sargent, purposefully used these small details to highlight her femininity and sexuality and to heighten the audience's horror. Grese is shown accompanying Dr. Mengele in a number of short scenes. In each, she comfortably conforms to our gendered expectations. In the scene that opened this chapter, Grese simpers at Mengele, and offers to murder a child for his pleasure. Afterwards, she slides next to him in his jeep as he drives off, and the dynamic feels familiar; the audience has seen this in dozens of films- the handsome leading man in his sports car, an

attractive woman beside him- only this time the couple is not off on a date, but rather to the medical block of Auschwitz I. In another scene they visit the barracks together in search of Jewish doctors. Grese coolly looks on while Mengele shoots several women. She trails him, suggestively stroking her riding crop while obviously deferring to his authority and enjoying it- again, a nod to the themes of power and domination explored in the exploitation films. Unlike the films that preceded it, this film never places Grese in a position of absolute power; instead she is always second to Mengele. The film imagines the workplace dynamic of Auschwitz as the viewer would like to see it. It captures none of the tensions between the *Aufseherinnen* and their male colleagues and superiors, instead presenting a traditional and expected relationship between a powerful man and beautiful female subordinate.

Finally we are shown Grese on her own. She visits the hospital block and threatens to shoot several patients, including Perl. Grese forces the injured and ill back to work and places her cocked pistol to Perl's head and whispers "bang". Though a very tame version, this scene recalls torture sequences from *Ilsa*, and informs the audience that Grese is cruel and erratic. The scene cuts to the postwar interrogation of Perl, and she is asked if Grese was once her patient. Perl informs the committee that "Irma Grese summoned me to her quarters because she believed herself pregnant." In stark contrast to Perl's memoir, which located Grese's abortion in the hospital, the film situates the procedure in Grese's bedroom. This change provides an opportunity to sexualize Grese further, as there is nothing sexy about a medical procedure in a camp hospital. However, here we are shown a lavish bedroom, ornately appointed with green silk pillows and heavy wooden furniture. The camera pans across the enormous room to rest on Grese, lounging seductively on her bed; she is dressed in a silk and lace negligee. Illuminated by candlelight, she lies beneath a portrait of Hitler which hangs over her bed- the scene is at once

patriotic and perverse. Grese's voice is low and seductive, different from the simpering tones she used with Mengele. In reference to her unwanted pregnancy she tells Perl to "get it out of me." The pistol she holds close to her body is decidedly phallic. The set and cinematography closely resemble that of *Ilsa's* opening scene in which the camera pans across a bedroom to find a naked Ilsa in bed with one of her prisoners.

Grese plays the whole scene from her bed, at first projecting power and dominance and then intense vulnerability. Perl begins the procedure and Grese looks frightened: "Will it hurt? I can't stand any sort of pain." The line is intended to sicken the audience- this brutal woman who carelessly tortures is personally terrified of pain. Like the exploitation films, it also elicits a darker response from viewers. Watching a scared Grese, the audience wants her to feel pain and they want to watch. If only for a moment, *Ashes* teases us with the possibility of "justice" through pain, a concept and location very familiar to "Nazisploitation". Perl's response that Grese will only feel a slight pinch reassures Grese and disappoints the audience. It is a troubling return to accepting the female body as a site of revenge.

The bordello look of the room, the costuming of Grese, and the reason for Perl's visit all function to highlight the reclining figure's sexuality. Perl is there to perform an abortion on an unmarried woman and we are left to wonder about the identity of her male partner. This portrayal trades on a traditional depiction of woman as seductress, and on the promiscuity of "SS women" established by exploitation films. Few films trouble themselves with thorough historical accuracy, but the point in noting such shortcomings here is to show that the overall trend of the changes made to Perl's account fits with exploitation tactics even if *Ashes* is intended to show women's experience of the Holocaust. In many ways what *Ashes* attempts to do is good and a much needed addition to Holocaust film. It features a female protagonist and

highlights the gendered terrors of the camps, particularly that of pregnancy. While Sargent was attuned to the need to develop the stories of women survivors, he slipped too easily into stereotypical depictions of female perpetrators. Such is often the case, and true of Holocaust scholarship in general: many are interested in understanding how women experienced the Holocaust, yet few are willing to admit that gender impacted perpetration as well.

The Reader

Though 2008's *The Reader* includes an *Aufseherin* as a central character, it too trades on the sexual deviance of the fictional "SS women."²⁸⁸ Based on the novel of the same name, *The Reader* tells the story of a young boy seduced by a much older woman who is later revealed to be a former concentration camp guard.²⁸⁹ Though ultimately about post-war secrets and the difficulties of the first generation to follow Nazi Germany, the story centers on an abnormal woman and her victim.

The opening scene, set in the present, informs us that the protagonist, Michael Berg, is incapable of intimacy and trust. He makes breakfast for a woman with whom he has spent the night, yet Berg hopes to avoid seeing her in the morning. The woman remarks on his obvious desire to evade her and on his unknowable nature. We immediately recognize him as a sad solitary man, but we have yet to learn the reason for his unhappy isolation. Then the film flashes back to 1950s Berlin. We see a young Michael stumbling through the rain and collapsing in an entryway as he vomits on himself and cries. Hannah Schmitz first rushes past him, then returns with a bucket of water to wash him and the pavement clean of the mess. Schmitz is not

²⁸⁸ Stephen Daldry, *The Reader* (United States: Weinstein Co., 2008). Based on the novel Bernhard Schlink, *Der Vorleser* (Zurich: Diogenes, 1995), translated and published in the United States as *The Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

²⁸⁹ Ilse Koch is also said to be the inspiration Hannah Schmitz, yet they are in no way similar. This shows the misunderstanding of the *Aufseherinnen* and the desire to lump them all into one stereotype.

squeamish as she goes about this task, then pulls Michael to his feet and hugs him saying, “Hey kid, it will be alright.” Schmitz is more authoritative than warm, but her actions are in their own way compassionate. She reassures him and walks him home. Schmitz, a streetcar worker, wears a uniform, giving her an extra note of authority and foreshadowing the eventual revelation that she was an *Aufseherin*.

After months of convalescing, Michael returns to Schmitz’s apartment, bearing flowers to thank this woman for her help. Michael approaches her building, an old and decrepit structure marked by signs of war and its aftermath. It is a reminder of Germany’s past. In the foreground we see new construction and repair, an obvious indication of Germany’s future. The tension between these realities is an ever-present theme of the film and we are reminded of Hannah Schmitz’s embodiment of the old and Michael Berg of the new. Michael enters her flat offering her the flowers. She ignores him and aggressively continues her ironing; incidentally she is ironing her undergarments, something both Michael and the audience notice. Schmitz orders Michael to stand in the hall while she changes into her uniform. Through the cracked door he watches Schmitz as she pulls up her stockings and attaches them to the garter belt. This gesture is iconically sexual. The two lock eyes in an awkward moment of discovery. Schmitz’s gaze is challenging and hard, while the boy is at first frozen and then in embarrassment rushes from the apartment. Schmitz is not seductive in this initial scene, though the scene is constructed to evoke her sexuality.

It is on Michael’s second visit that the affair begins. Schmitz asks him to fill a bucket of coal from the basement, a task that covers Berg in coal dust. Schmitz insists that he undress immediately and draws him a bath. Her manner is brusquely familiar and reminiscent of a frustrated mother: “You look ridiculous kid. You can’t go home like that. Take off your clothes.”

Though Michael is confused and hesitant, he obeys and enjoys the bath. Hannah assures him she will not look at his naked body, but once in the bathtub, she watches him through the curtain before she retrieves a towel. Michael stands modestly, with his back to the room, as Hannah drapes the towel across his body and the camera pans out slightly to show Hannah's now naked body pressed against Michael. She drops the towel and turns the awkward teenager to face her. Michael is confused by the sudden shift from maternal to seductress, but does not object. He whispers that she is beautiful and she gives him a sharp look and says, "What are you talking about, kid?" Again, her use of "kid" is both endearing and dominating.

Though there is nothing violent about this sexual encounter or the ones that follow, it is, however, apparent that Hannah takes advantage of Michael's youth and inexperience. She is in her late thirties and he is only 16. Schmitz is always the one in control; she decides when they will see each other and when they will have sex. He complies with her every request. Soon Hannah insists that Michael read to her prior to any sexual activity. Oddly, it is only in these moments that Hannah is normalized. While reading, Michael is shown to be in control, Hannah lies happily in his arms as he reads her everything from Homer to Mark Twain. In these moments the "natural" order has been restored. Hannah is not shown to be deviant, but happily submissive to Michael. Though their relationship at times seems normal, it continues to mix aspects of the maternal with the sexual. At one point they are mistaken for mother and son. While on a cycling trip through the countryside, a waitress refers to Schmitz as Michael's mother; Michael responds by kissing Schmitz to clarify their relationship. He feels no shame or deviance. Michael is excited and proud to be with Schmitz, and it is he who views their relationship as normal.

The affair continues happily for a month; then Schmitz's insecurities begin and she lashes out at Michael. We begin to see her erratic side and understand that there is something

mysterious and unknowable about her. In fact all that we concretely know of Schmitz is that she works on a streetcar and that she loves to be read to. And though Michael loves her, he knows as little about her as the audience. We learn more about Michael's life outside of the hours he shares with Schmitz. We see him with friends, family, at school, and playing sports. Schmitz's closed distance is also unusual for female characters. If the gender roles were reversed and it were an older man who was in control and emotionally unavailable, it would be read as normal rather than suspiciously aberrant.

As time passes, they fight more and more. Schmitz explodes with anger and refuses to discuss the cause. Each time Michael desperately rushes to apologize and appease her, though he never is actually at fault. As seen in "Nazisploitation", Schmitz, the domineering woman, is always in control, erratically wielding power. Here, the female lead is not so obviously punishing as in prior films, but the idea is clearly present. Michael lacks power and is at her mercy. Schmitz is promoted to an office job, an advancement she does not want. In response to this unwanted promotion she picks fights with Michael. Then again, in a bizarre blending of sexual and maternal, she rejects his sexual advances only to force him into the bathtub where she roughly scrubs him clean. The power dynamic is clear: she is upset with him and he submits meekly like a child in trouble. She cleans him as a mother would a dirty child. Then just as suddenly as before, the scene becomes sexual, only this time it is Michael who initiates it. Afterwards, Schmitz commands Michael to go to his friends. He obeys and she hurriedly packs her belongings and leaves. Michael later returns to find an empty apartment; he is confused and heartbroken. He will not see her again for many years. She disappears and we know nothing of her life for the next decade. We see Michael grow up and attend university, though he is

obviously damaged by her sudden leaving. The audience is given sufficient details of Michael's life to understand his character and his motivations.

As a university student, Michael attends a war crimes trial where he learns that one of the defendants is his Hannah Schmitz. It is a difficult process for Michael to learn about the Nazi past of Schmitz. In her capacity as an overseer she selected the weak and sick to read to her before sending them to their deaths. Michael appears undone at this disclosure and its connection to his own relationship with Schmitz. The trial portions of the film are by far the most nuanced. While Schmitz is on trial, the film still focuses on Michael's reaction rather than on Schmitz herself. The secret at the heart of the film is revealed as Schmitz is accused of leading the group of SS women whose actions resulted in the deaths of hundreds of prisoners. During a death march from Auschwitz, the guards locked prisoners into a church for the night. The church caught fire during an air raid and the guards refused to unlock the doors, which caused almost all of the prisoners to burn to death. Schmitz admits to not unlocking the doors and offers the explanation that to do so would have caused chaos and the guards would not have been able to restore order. It is the most honest and accurate moment in the film as Schmitz explains her logic: such an action was against the assigned nature of her job.

When the other defendants accuse Schmitz of giving the orders and writing the report confirming this, Schmitz lies to the court and takes the blame rather than provide a handwriting sample. At this moment Michael realizes why she always wanted someone to read to her: she is illiterate, and she is very ashamed of it. Her shame is great enough to make her confess to a crime she was incapable of committing. One of the major historical faults with *The Reader* is Hannah Schmitz's illiteracy. In fact, the entire plot hinges on this fact, and yet, as shown in chapter one, *Aufseherinnen* were required to pass a written exam to enter camp service. Her

illiteracy would have made membership impossible. Michael seems torn about his duty to disclose this fact to the court. He justifies his silence as protecting her secret, but the audience knows it is more about his own complicated feelings. For her leadership role Schmitz is sentenced to life in prison.

Years after her imprisonment, Michael's own loneliness and grief motivate him to send Schmitz audio tapes of himself reading books. Eventually Schmitz teaches herself to read with the help of his recordings and she writes letters to him. Michael never responds to her letters, and after all these years he furthers the position of dominance he first gained by withholding the truth about her illiteracy.

In the end, much like the "Nazisploitation" films that preceded it, it is the male who gains power: he remains silent during her war crimes trial rather than provide the key to her innocence, he never writes, he visits only once, and refuses the attention she desperately wanted from him. And as in earlier films, in the end she dies. On the eve of her release, after speaking with Michael, Hannah takes her own life. Michael is distant and condescending during his only visit to Schmitz. He judgmentally questions what she has learned during her incarceration. We are left to assume that her suicide was an admission of guilt and remorse caused by Michael's visit. And like the earlier films, it is an act meant to restore order.

By the film's end we still know very little about Schmitz other than that she is an aberration, filled with shame - not for her work during the war, but for her illiteracy. We know her as a figure who blurs the lines of the maternal and the sexual. She is not seen for who she is, only for her role in moving the story forward. We never really know her, which is in keeping with the pop culture depictions of *Aufseherinnen*; they remain unknowable - perhaps purposefully so because the real message is not about them.

The choice to feature a woman guard in such a story is striking. What are the author and filmmaker trying to express by using her? Their purpose is not as mine is here, to give face and voice to thousands of women forgotten and misused by the intervening years. This is a story about postwar Germany, and the tensions between those of the Nazi generation and those that followed. Schmitz is the old generation of Nazi Germany, Michael is the new. The author, Bernhard Schlink, uses an unequal love story, in which youth is taken, twisted, and hurt, as the symbol for postwar Germany. Not surprisingly, the author makes the main character and stand-in for the new Germany a male. This means, quite fittingly, that old Nazi Germany is embodied by a female. She is weak, deceptive, deviant, perhaps loveable at times, but not trustworthy. In order for this formula to work, the older woman must have an active Nazi past, and for Michael to feel so betrayed and conflicted, the woman he once loved must be given a suitably awful Nazi past. No factory work or nursing will do; she must not only have been involved in the war effort, but in the most distinguishing and grotesque of the Nazi projects- the Holocaust. She must be a guard. The fact that this very popular book and film featured a woman guard should not be taken as a sign of interest in the *Aufseherinnen* or even of seeing the Holocaust with a gendered lens. It has little to do with these women and everything to do with the men around them and with the dominant society that shapes her story and the story of all these women.

The Reader almost tricks us into believing that its story is uniquely about a woman guard. However, a closer reading reveals that it too is reductive in its treatment of Schmitz. It only uses her as a means to another end, rather than her story being the end itself. Schmitz, like many depictions of women, was defined by her adherence to aberrance from sexual norms and restricted by maternal expectations. This reduction to the sexual or the maternal resulted in the loss of the authenticity and individuality of these characters. Though Hannah Schmitz was a

fictional woman whose story was created in the service of another goal, the same obfuscation can be noted with screen portrayals of historical *Aufseherinnen*.

Playing for Time

In 1980, CBS debuted *Playing for Time* as their program of the week. Based on a memoir of the same name, it is the story of French cabaret singer Fania Fénelon and her time in the Auschwitz orchestra. A comparison of the memoir and movie show how the changes made to the screen character of the historical Maria Mandel trend in the same reductive direction.

Sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau for her work in the resistance in 1944, Fénelon was quickly recruited to the women's orchestra where she had frequent dealings with the orchestra's main patron, Maria Mandel. As a member of the orchestra and not a regular prisoner, Fénelon had a different relationship with the SS leadership, and particularly with Mandel. Unlike other prisoners who might have only seen her from a distance, Fénelon dealt with Mandel on a daily basis and enjoyed her favor and protection. Fénelon's account provides personal descriptions of Mandel unseen elsewhere. From her first encounter she highlights Mandel's beauty and reproductive value- even by prisoners these guards were seen as women first.

Mandel, hands elegantly on hips-long, white, delicate hands which stood out against the grey cloth of her uniform- stared at us, her hard china-blue eyes lingeringly searching on my face. This was the first time a representative of the German race had looked at me, had seemed to be aware of my presence. She took off her cap and her hair was a wonderful golden blond, done in thick plaits around her head... I noted everything about her: her face, without a trace of makeup (forbidden by the SS), was luminous, her white teeth large but fine. She was perfect, too perfect. A splendid example of the master race: top-quality breeding material- so what was she doing here instead of reproducing?²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ Fania Fenelon, *Playing for Time*, 30.

In this account, Maria Mandel, the most powerful woman in Birkenau, was reduced to biology-as-destiny. Fénelon's question was one that echoed throughout the Nazi regime: what were these women doing here? Though Fénelon is struck by Mandel's attractive appearance, and notes her genetic desirability, Fénelon does not sexualize Mandel. Her descriptions convey beauty, but not sexuality.

After successfully auditioning for the orchestra, Fénelon was given real clothes and the correct size of shoe, rather than the scraps of ill-fitting uniforms given to most prisoners. It was an unexpected kindness bestowed by Mandel, and one that took some attention to detail. Fénelon had unusually small feet and Mandel herself sorted through an enormous box of shoes to find the right size. Then, as a saleswoman might kneel before a customer, Mandel placed the shoes on Fénelon's feet and said, "My little Butterfly will have warm feet. It's vital for the throat."²⁹¹ This incident depicts Mandel as an ordinary individual.

The idea of an orchestra in a death camp might seem absurd, but in fact was established to serve a particular purpose there. Both the men's and women's orchestras played while new arrivals were sent to the gas chambers, during roll calls, and during selections. This music was intended to provide a deceptive sense of comfort, much like the flowers and misleading signs outside the gas chambers. On occasion, the orchestra also gave concerts for the SS and visiting Nazi officials. Despite its darker purpose, the orchestra saved its members' lives. It also allowed them a unique set of interactions with the SS.

Fénelon points out that unlike the men's group, which was a real symphony orchestra with excellent players and soloists, the women's group was far less professional. Yet despite the inequality, there was a rivalry between the two and Mandel wanted her women to outshine the men. The competition was perhaps symbolic of the larger position of inequality experienced by

²⁹¹ Fénelon, *Playing for Time* 31.

Mandel in other areas of her job. She could not raise the status of the *Aufseherinnen* to equal that of the male SS officers, but she could raise the quality of the women's orchestra to compete with Joseph Kramer's pet project of the men's orchestra. Mandel selected Alma Rosé, a very skilled violinist, and likely the most talented woman in the group, as the conductor. Certainly finding Fénelon was an exciting addition to her group as well and explains the special treatment Fénelon received.

Fénelon's memoir consists of a series of vignettes that we assume happen in chronological order but are not tied to the constraints of a standard narrative ill-suited to gaps and lapses of time. Fénelon had dealings with Mandel and other SS women, and though she frequently describes the other SS women in negative terms and expresses surprise when Mandel shows kindness, she does not record any of Mandel's acts of cruelty. Rather Mandel's acts of decency are described and often met with disbelief, and perhaps mistrust, yet are real. In one episode, Alma Rosé is informed that she is to be transferred into the Wehrmacht to entertain the troops, an exciting prospect for this ardent German patriot. However, on the eve of her departure, Rosé was poisoned at dinner by Frau Schmidt, a powerful kapo.²⁹²

When Rosé began to exhibit signs of extreme illness in the middle of the night, the women of the orchestra sent for Mandel, who came to Rosé's bedside bringing an SS doctor with her. This action shows the special relationship between this group of prisoners and Mandel. Indeed, Rosé's death was marked with a memorial service attended by the SS, many of whom were moved to tears by the passing of Alma Rosé. Fénelon describes Mandel's eyes as "full of tears; in honor of Alma, we mingled our tears with hers - we were in complete communion! An unforgettable scene."²⁹³ Fénelon and her fellow orchestra mates struggled to understand the

²⁹² Ibid., 203.

²⁹³ Ibid., 208.

disconnect between Mandel and the SS men overseeing the daily murder of thousands of Jews and yet weeping over the death of one.

Time and again, Fénelon depicts Mandel's humanity and shows her to be a complicated maternal figure. This is shown in her behavior toward Alma Rosé, but perhaps more clearly in the incident regarding the little Jewish boy Mandel "adopts". During the arrival and selection of a new transport, a little boy caught Mandel's eye. He stumbled toward her, arms outstretched, and though Fénelon expected Mandel would kick the child out of her way, Mandel plucked the boy from the crowd and his mother and carried him away with her. Here again it is telling that Fénelon expects cruelty, and is bewildered by Mandel's humanity. In the days that followed the little boy, now smartly dressed in blue suits, went everywhere with Mandel. He was her constant companion and plaything, until it was no longer possible to keep him. One night Mandel appeared in the orchestra block to request her favorite selection from "Madam Butterfly." Her eyes reddened, her face drained of color, she listened silently, and then left abruptly. Later the orchestra learned that Mandel had just returned from taking the boy to be killed.

The story is striking and troubling. Mandel mothers the boy until it is no longer possible to keep him, much as she mothers the orchestra- so long as it is possible she will keep and protect them. Fénelon's account of the little boy foreshadows what she thinks will eventually happen to the women of the orchestra. They, like the child, must put their faith in Mandel as mother and protector, yet they know this woman cannot be trusted fully. In both cases, Mandel's actions are not attributed to personal erratic behavior or sadism, but rather to Mandel's position within the system. Fénelon rationalizes her behavior, saying Mandel was a committed fanatic who had to do what the Nazi party told her. Fénelon is partly right, Mandel did have to conform to the requirements of the camp system, but she did not have to be a fanatic to do so; she was only

an ordinary employee adhering to the rules of her workplace and position. Fénelon occasionally refers to Mandel and her SS colleagues, including Kramer, though Mengele is absent from her account. Fénelon's memoir makes a more nuanced portrayal of Mandel possible, while the cinematic version is clumsy and unsure in its depictions of perpetrators.

Both versions of *Playing for Time* depict Maria Mandel as a maternal figure, albeit motherhood with a twist. And similarly to the memoir, Mandel on film is shown to be beautiful, but not sexual. The film version of Mandel is matronly in appearance- stocky in stature, neatly dressed, hair and make-up nicely done, but lacking any overt sexuality. Unlike the memoir, she is often placed in situations with Mengele and Kramer and is shown to be submissive and deferential, yet not as a sexual object to them. Fénelon describes Mandel as poised and elegant: the screen shows Mandel to be ungraceful and unnatural in her uniform and position. The film does highlight Mandel as an active and proud patron of the women's orchestra and shows her to be attentive to the needs of the orchestra.

The film also depicts the incident with the little boy, though it significantly diverges from the memoir. Both versions show Mandel fawning over the child and have her upset upon his death. However, in the memoir this is a standalone account of Mandel; in the film it is much more. In print, the next mention of her has Mandel doing her job as normal. The film version has Mandel undone- madly wandering around searching for the child's cap that she kept as a souvenir. For the remainder of the film Mandel is in a crazed state of grief, broken from reality. The affect is oddly humanizing, yet also serves to highlight her womanliness, and for that matter her weakness. It re-imagines Mandel in familiar, understandable terms, that of a mother broken from the loss of her child. Fénelon's Mandel grieves, yet continues to work; the screen's Mandel is incapable of continuing her job because her "child" has died. The screen Mandel now fails in

her “motherly” duties a second time; in her hysteric grief she neglects the orchestra, leaving them vulnerable to the crushing chaos of the final days of Auschwitz.

The cinematic representation is far from the woman described in chapter two, the woman who skillfully navigated the liminal space allotted her by the administration. In reality, Mandel successfully performed her job despite the difficulties she and her subordinates faced due to lack of administrative support because they were women in a man’s position. The filmmakers portray Mandel as embodying her gender norms rather than defying them. Fénelon’s writing uses the incident to discuss Mandel’s humanity: was her decision to take the child to his death proof she is “human” or proof she is a monster? The film fails to address these complexities, yet succeeds in reducing Mandel to a weak woman and failed mother.

Another substantial change to Fénelon’s account concerned the death of Alma Rosé. The film turns Frau Schmidt, the woman responsible for Rosé’s death, from kapo to guard and she serves as the only other example of a female guard in the film. She is an older woman with graying hair and a gruff, uncouth demeanor. Her character sleeps or picks her teeth during the concert scenes, while Mandel and Mengele sit with rapt attention. This character makes Mandel seem friendly and sophisticated by comparison. Fénelon posits that Schmidt poisoned Rosé because this guard was frustrated that her transfer requests had been denied.

The memoir offers many other examples of SS women, though Mandel is by far the most predictable and decent. Others are described by Fénelon as being in a state of perpetual anger, of taking pleasure in acts of confiscation and other disruptions to prisoner life. The film omits these examples of *Aufseherinnen* shown in the context of prison guards, yet fabricates a more salacious context.²⁹⁴ It also removes Mandel from the position of the primary griever of Rosé and replaces her with Mengele. This too is inaccurate; Mengele was not a part of Fénelon’s memoir, yet

²⁹⁴ Fénelon, 136.

because of his historical notoriety the film places him at the center of the SS funeral held for Alma Rosé, and again the *Aufseherinnen* are displaced. The inclusion of Mengele in the funeral scene also gives the film the opportunity to briefly show Mandel, Mengele, and the little boy as a family. Mandel enters the orchestra barrack carrying the child. There she meets Mengele to whom she familiarly passes the child while she pays her respects to Alma Rosé. The three of them stand beside the coffin looking very much like a grieving family. The short sequence takes the familiar family composition and twists it to make the audience uncomfortable.

The film *Playing for Time* is a flawed film. A product of the 1980s “made-for-TV” genre, it was made before audiences were saturated with cinematic depictions of the Holocaust, and it predated interest in women’s experience of the Holocaust. Though based on a woman’s memoir, the screenplay was written by Arthur Miller. The change from woman’s story to man’s interpretation is felt throughout the film. Miller’s adaptation not only essentialized Mandel to a hysterical mother, it also placed undue emphasis and moral judgment on storylines of prostitution among the female prisoners in Birkenau. Fénelon’s account noted the occurrence, but did not make it a focus of her story. Likewise, the screenplay repeatedly showed the female prisoners discussing Mandel’s beauty and its relationship to her humanity. And only Fénelon’s character believes that Mandel is both beautiful and human.

The memoir richly describes romantic same-sex relationships between the female prisoners, while the film makes only brief allusions to these consensual relationships but has Fénelon being teased about Mandel’s fondness for her. The film has a fellow prisoner suggest that Mandel must expect something in return for her favor. Fénelon was a favorite of Mandel’s but the relationship was never sexual. Still Mandel is not seen as a sexual creature; indeed this is what is intended to be repulsive about the suggestion, that this utterly matronly, non-sexual

woman might demand sexual favor from Fénelon in exchange for her shoes and toothbrush. Much of the depth and contradiction in the person of Maria Mandel are lost when brought to film and we are left with a failed mother figure.

Conclusion

The films selected for discussion within this chapter are not the only films to include SS women. Rather, they are a few whose inclusion amounts to more than a small number of background shots and those that embody the overall trend in *Aufseherinnen* representations. In these films we see *Aufseherinnen* reduced to essentialized shells of the seductress or mother, often with a twist of deviance, and we see the subtle influence of “Nazisploitation”. It is not my intent to exaggerate the importance of this genre, but its brief existence highlights the ongoing phenomenon of our cultural fascination with Nazis, and especially with the connection between Nazis and sex. This connection is noted among academics and social critics, but has not been properly analyzed for what this means for Nazi women and women in society.

In the midst of the Nazisploitation craze Susan Sontag sought to explain the trend of “sexy Nazis” in her 1974 article “Fascinating Fascism.” In this piece Sontag enumerates the factors that make the Nazis symbols of deviant sexuality, and thus an object of cultural fascination. Though the field of perpetrator studies has advanced greatly since the 1970s, the cultural understanding of Nazis has stagnated. Sontag first pointed to the beauty of the Nazis, particularly the SS, by saying they were both “supremely violent and supremely beautiful.”²⁹⁵ The iconic uniforms of the SS are given as a primary example; in fact, a book on Nazi uniforms was the subject for the *New York Review of Books* essay. Secondly, she notes that the power

²⁹⁵ Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism” *New York Review of Books*, 6 February 1975.

dynamic between Nazis and their prisoners was so complete that a reenactment of it was privately adopted into bdsm culture and more publicly into the genre of Nazisploitation. Thirdly, Sontag notes that within acceptable Western society to identify with anything related to Nazis is a deviation from the norm, so to introduce Nazism to sexual fantasy is to engage in something forbidden. She writes that “in pornographic literature, films, and gadgetry throughout the world, especially in the United States, England, France, Japan, Scandinavia, Holland, and Germany, the SS has become a referent of sexual adventurism.”²⁹⁶

Though she does not say as much, Sontag references the obvious truth that genocide is what sets the Nazis apart from other wartime regimes; it is the Holocaust that makes them truly deviant. She does note that “most people who are turned on by SS uniforms are not signifying approval of what the Nazis did, if indeed they have more than the sketchiest idea of what that might be. Nevertheless, there are powerful and growing currents of sexual feeling, those that generally go by the name of sadomasochism, which make playing at Nazism seem erotic.”²⁹⁷ An important distinction is that it is the *act* of deviance that is desired, not the *ideals* of fascism. Lastly, she notes the common fascist imagery that regarded leadership as sexual mastery over the feminine masses as rape. Leftist movements, meanwhile, were more unisex or asexual, downplaying any sexual difference among followers and certainly not evoking imagery of rape or domination.

Though Sontag’s piece addresses many questions surrounding the fascination with fascism as seen in her time, and indeed even in our own, she fails to mention the place of women in fascism. The SS she speaks of are men, the aberrant sexuality she describes is male. This is a surprising omission given the prominent place of women in Nazisploitation films as the greatest

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

signifiers and sites of deviance. Sontag ignored the role of women and the deep hatred of women shown in these representations. Instead, she focused on what these films mean for masculinity and the Nazi relationship to masculinity and yet failed to consider what that meant for the construction of femininity.²⁹⁸ A typical reading of the torture and humiliation of women on screen is to say that it is not about women but about lacking masculinity. Others have written about how exploitation films were a useful tool to distance themselves from fascism, as in Italy, and so these films were seen to be a political healing.²⁹⁹ The focus is always the state, the big, masculine picture, rather than women and the cultural assumptions about women.

Though Sontag wrote on the phenomenon of “sexy Nazis,” no one has considered the implications for the *Aufseherinnen* and more broadly for women in general. There is much to be said about women by examining their position and portrayal in these films. What can depictions of *Aufseherinnen* in Nazisploitation, and even more broadly in the mainstream films discussed above, tell us about violence against women, violence as pleasure, and the symbolic rape of German women in film compared to that of actual rape by the Soviets at the war’s end? Similarly, what can we learn about cultural assumptions of women from mainstream treatments of SS women? Mainstream film reinforces all the reductive stereotypes of women and SS women without ever telling us anything meaningful about these women. The SS women are a rich example of women in history and society - largely ignored and not only misrepresented, but actively reappropriated.

Female perpetrators are ignored; we only want them to exist for our needs. Their existence was problematic for their bosses and the regime that created them. They lacked the conceptual space then, they were not the nurses and mothers doing the women’s work of the

²⁹⁸ For a focus on masculinity see Stephen R. Haynes, “Ordinary Masculinity: Gender Analysis and Holocaust Scholarship,” *Journal of Men’s Studies* 10.2 (Winter 2002): 143.

²⁹⁹ Sabine Hake’s *Screen Nazis* is largely concerned with this issue.

Reich, but postwar popular imagination created a version of them that fit the normative space for women - seductress and mother. Yet their depictions as such are used to express the deviance of the Nazi regime; they are not about the individuals who served as *Aufseherinnen*.

Why are there no films about Nazi women in which they are real main characters? *The Reader* is the best attempt yet and even that is not about Schmitz- the title tells us this- it is the Reader, not the read to. In it we are given a woman as the stand-in for all of Nazi Germany- a woman who both mothers and seduces a young boy. In *Out of the Ashes*, Irma Grese is a background player who signifies the depravity of Nazi Germany. Though striving to depict a feminine perspective, the film employs watered-down tactics of Nazisploitation to thrill and shock the audience. In *Playing for Time*, Maria Mandel floats in and out of the narrative as failed mother figure, yet always lacks substance. Why are we afraid to tell the stories of these women? What about these women do we not want to understand? In understanding them we can see not only how ordinary people commit crimes, but how ordinary women are imagined and repurposed; in this way these perpetrators are all the more ordinary. Theirs is the story of countless women before them and indeed since, ignored or repurposed. These women are recast as we would like them to be and as they are most useful to us.

CONCLUSION

Paradox of Ordinary Women

When I began this project I hoped to provide the “ordinary women” to Christopher Browning’s “ordinary men.” Though Browning discussed male perpetrators and offered a satisfying account of how expectations of masculinity impacted their behavior in the Order Police, there was still the implicit assumption that “ordinary men” equates to “ordinary people.” I began my study with a similar mentality: ordinary women equaled ordinary people and I would fill this gap in scholarship. I would show how ordinary women perpetrated genocide and further nuance Browning’s assertion that the Holocaust was carried out by everyday people, not evil monsters. As I expected, there were some gendered differences. Unlike the men of Police Battalion 101, the *Aufseherinnen* acted in ways that rejected conformity to their own gender norms while embracing the male expectations that governed their workplace. In the end, my research showed that the women of the SS were indeed very ordinary. They were everyday people: shopkeepers, hairdressers, factory workers, and farm girls. They were not selected for their political beliefs or their propensity to cruelty. Yet, the fact remained that they were also women - ordinary women who were subject to discrimination, exploitation, and obfuscation in ways that ordinary men were not. At first I was only looking for what made them average individuals, but time and again I was reminded of how much their experience was shaped by their gender or gendered expectations. This does not make them victims, but it nuances how we read their perpetration. Though I still adhere to Browning’s theory of “ordinariness”, I now contend that among the social pressures and motivations attributed to participation in perpetration, the role of gender must be given more attention.

Every facet of their employment was marked by their gender. The existence of the *Aufseherinnen* went against the Nazi ideals of woman. As such it placed this auxiliary group in a difficult position. Trapped between the ideals of the state and its needs, the *Aufseherinnen* encountered discrimination in their workplace, and they lacked the respect and support of their male colleagues and superiors. Unlike the SS men, *Aufseherinnen* were not recruited or trained for a lifelong brotherhood. Instead, they were selected for a specific job - guarding prisoners - that was intended to expire at the end of the war. Their position as SS auxiliaries did not come with the privileged position afforded to the men who were its actual members. There was nothing unusual about their recruitment, though they did have to meet certain requirements. Applicants had to be healthy and civically and financially sound. They also had to pass a written exam, testing their knowledge of basic geography, math, history, and common sense. And even in late stages of the war, background checks were conducted to insure *Aufseherinnen* had a criminal-free past. This was, after all, government work, and trustworthy citizens were required.

Their training served to transform them from civilian to military auxiliary. Little focus was placed on rhetoric and ideology, but instead centered on the daily matters of the camp: detecting sabotage and work slowdowns, transporting prisoners, and punishing escape attempts. This training, given in the form of lectures, on-the-job instruction, and written materials, often expected women to universalize to the male. Training was often short and inadequately prepared them for many aspects of their job. It did not train them in conducting *appell*, communicating rules to a multilingual prisoner population, or dealing with the challenges of overcrowding and disease that faced most camps by the war's end. Most significantly, there was little official instruction in the administration of violence or in determining which infractions warranted punishment. This left both to the discretion of the individual. These women were not practiced

decision makers. The *Aufseherinnen* were left to improvise violence and to modify their tactics over their camp service. Some, however, did succeed and rose through the ranks to positions of greater responsibility. Their jobs required that they understand the camp on a broad scale and see how each position functioned within the whole. These *Oberaufseherinnen* instructed prisoner leaders, managed the *Aufseherinnen* below them, and liaised with the camp administration. They were expected to “guide” and “support” the male leaders on matters pertaining to their workplace. And they held staff meetings, wrote reports, managed the food supply and dealt with personnel matters of their subordinates. Many took pride in properly fulfilling the duties of their employment. No matter their rank, *Aufseherinnen* were not intended to be part of the Final Solution, but rather a temporary solution to a shortage of men; their training reflected this, their work experience did not.

The system that handled millions was proficient in killing, yet remained inefficient in managing those it did not immediately murder. This presented *Aufseherinnen* with a number of workplace challenges, including *appell*, food production and scarcity, language barriers, frequent changes in assignment, and adaptations to the evolving camp system. And underlying it all was an acrimonious relationship with their male colleagues. Insulted and disparaged by these SS men, occasionally *Aufseherinnen* sought to prove themselves to these men through an increased use of violence toward prisoners. When the *Aufseherinnen* struggled to conduct *appell*, they were seen as incompetent and lazy by their male colleagues and superiors - derided as a “bunch of flustered hens.” Resenting the placement of female overseers in the camps, the male administration was prepared to let them fail, rather than to provide them with assistance or the needed tools to succeed. Though the priority was to execute the Final Solution smoothly and to maintain order within the camp system, that goal was not so important that it suppressed the

typical and very ordinary response by men to an influx of women into a field where they were thought not to belong. Destruction of a common enemy was an important goal; however, it was not enough to unite the divided guard staff. *Aufseherinnen* reacted to this hostile work environment by seeking their own strategies for success. At times this meant enlisting the help of prisoners, who often had better managerial and bookkeeping skills than they.

The conditions of overcrowding and food shortage impacted the *Aufseherinnen*. Fewer female guards to watch greater numbers of female prisoners increased the difficulty of their work; in Birkenau less than 70 *Aufseherinnen* guarded 30,000 inmates. In Bergen-Belsen between 40 and 50 *Aufseherinnen* watched almost 29,000 prisoners. The conditions of overcrowding were often worse in the women's camps. A significant duty of the *Aufseherinnen* was managing and guarding food production. These overseers were charged with producing tens of thousands of rations with limited food supplies and limited access to water and electricity. Because of the scarcity of food, there was a great deal of violence surrounding its production and distribution. Many *Aufseherinnen* admitted to striking prisoners who stole food; they explained their actions as necessary for their job, rather than out of an enjoyment of violence.

While some women remained on one work detail for a majority of their time in a particular camp, the experience of many was to be shuffled around as need dictated. They had to be ready to adapt to new work crews and a diverse range of tasks. They were responsible for gathering wood, overseeing factory work, running the bathhouses, and filling in when needed in the kitchens. These were the real responsibilities of their workplace, though such mundane details are often overlooked. The workday began early for guards and prisoners alike and the poor conditions of the camp were felt by all those who lived and worked there.

Despite their responsibilities and position, even these leaders were not seen as equals by their male colleagues. The *Aufseherinnen* lacked a conceptual space; they were not the mothers, or nurses, or secretaries of the *Reich*. They did not share the status of the SS men, or the comfortable placement of the *Helferinnen*. Left in a liminal space, *Aufseherinnen* did their best to fulfill the duties of their job. They never received the full measure of respect accorded to the SS, and their role in running the camps was never fully recognized by the male administration. Such recognition came only at the end of the war; and at a moment least personally beneficial to them. Though never granted equality by the Nazis, the Allies did not fail to see that these women bore equal responsibility for the running of the camps. When the war ended and the war trials began, women of the *Aufseherinnen* and SS men were tried, sentenced, and in some cases, executed side by side. They admitted and seized responsibility, costing some their lives. In the moment of postwar justice, the *Aufseherinnen* were admitted to the equality they were denied by their own administrators.

While seen by the Allies as sharing equal responsibility for the crimes committed within the camps, their actions and crimes were presented to the court and the world differently than those of their male colleagues. From the first day of the Belsen trial the prosecutor labeled the *Aufseherinnen* as cruel and described their particularly “cruelties” for the court. He also suggested that they felt enjoyment and pleasure in their use of violence. Male defendants were not asked if they “gloried” in the jackboots and pistols. Boots and pistols are accepted and normal parts of a male military uniform. Additionally, the female defendants were expected to feel shocked and sorry for what they had witnessed and done; similar feelings or sorrow were not expected from the men put on trial. The unconscious gender expectations of the prosecutor and

court impacted the way these women and their actions were presented, and how they were judged.

Not only were they disadvantaged by the court because they were women, they also disadvantaged themselves. The female defendants poorly navigated the trial process. They frequently admitted too much, gave too much detail, and offered explanations that made little sense outside of the broken reality of the camp workplace. All defendants faced the challenge of piloting between these two realities- that of the courtroom and the camp - but the *Aufseherinnen* were less adept at this navigation. While the male defendants gave simple, straightforward answers or offered flat denial, the women said too much for their own good. Those in leadership positions such as Grese, Binz, and Ehlert gave especially candid answers, displaying their knowledge of their workplace and ownership of their work. Almost eager to detail their work, they showed a misplaced pride that cost them dearly.

At times the female defendants lied, but surprisingly, it was rarely about their own actions, but rather those of the guards around them. After admitting to their own acts of violence, they denied seeing others use similar techniques. So they not only failed to normalize their own behavior within a context of violence, they also failed to understand how to lie to their own advantage. Similarly, the *Aufseherinnen* missed the cues of their counsel when they attempted to lead them to advantageous answers. Some, like Irma Grese, were unable to resist the badgering of the prosecution and responded with arrogance and sarcasm.

As a result of their poor navigation, 84 percent of female defendants were convicted during the Belsen trial, compared to only 50 percent of male defendants. Considering that their actions were very similar and that the men on trial were in higher positions of power than the *Aufseherinnen*, it is a profound contrast. The higher rates of conviction speak to both the bias

held against women who acted outside their gender norms and to the poor navigation skills of the women themselves. In each case it is clear that to be female was a disadvantage.

In many ways Grese played directly into the Allied perception of her. She was either unaware or did not care that her demeanor and attitude hurt her case. It also caught the attention of the press. Much like the prosecutor's attitude, the media coverage reflected the belief that violence was not expected from women. Thus, the press coverage of the trials focused on the actions of female defendants while remaining silent on those of their male colleagues. The press also suggested that the *Aufseherinnen* derived pleasure from hurting prisoners. Such emotions were not ascribed to SS men; rather it was accepted that sometimes men used violence, and thus there was nothing aberrant about its male expression. In an interesting contrast, the German press showed less fascination within the presence of women as guards in the camp system, presumably because this fact had been known to them all along. Though their actions were presented in similar ways by the press, private opinion of everyday Germans did specifically note a special satisfaction at the death of Dorothea Binz.

Defense counsel for the *Aufseherinnen* attempted to access the same gender expectations that had been used against their female defendants, yet they were unsuccessful. Counsel argued that they were young girls and women who had been agitated by the prospect of turning out poorly prepared meals. Though defense strategies were gendered, appeals were not. Both women and men utilized similar strategies to receive reduced sentences. They cited youth, family obligations and superior orders.

After the era of postwar trials ended the *Aufseherinnen* largely disappeared from history. Their reality was lost and instead replaced with a distorted image created from the press coverage and popular imagination. In the postwar years "Stalag" fiction and "Nazisplotation"

films reappropriated the image of the *Aufseherinnen* to create a sexy dominatrix. This was a troubling transition. These books and films used the concept of “SS women” who were so violent and evil that they deserved equally violent punishment, to give audiences a guilt-free way to enjoy extreme violence against women. Though part of low-brow culture, these genres nonetheless influenced mainstream film and media. Thus, it is possible to see the image of Irma Grese transformed into that of Ilsa, the blonde, depraved, character of Nazisploitation, and the character of Ilsa converted to Elsa, the double-crossing Nazi doctor who seduces Indiana Jones. The cycle completes itself when mainstream films portraying Irma Grese do so by referencing the style and costuming of Ilsa as seen in Nazisploitation.

Gender impacted how the *Aufseherinnen* perpetrated the Holocaust: their training, their work experience, their trial performance, and even their reappropriated memory point to these differences. Their experience was not that of men. The *Aufseherinnen* can never fully be the “ordinary other” to Browning’s men because they were *the other*, they were women. The paradox of “ordinary women” is that by being female they ceased to be ordinary. Though average as women, their experience cannot be seen as a human universal. I had hoped only to add to our knowledge of how ordinary people commit extraordinary crimes, but what I found was something far more complicated. What began with a question about genocide ended with a story about the position of women in the modern West. Be it in the offices of 21st century America, or the concentration camps of 20th century Germany, women often remain the other, and their experience is indelibly complicated by their gendered otherness.

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