Women in Nazi Germany

In the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) program of 25 points published in 1920 stated that it disapproved of women working. Adolf Hitler claimed that the emancipation of women was a slogan invented by Jewish intellectuals. He argued that for the German woman her "world is her husband, her family, her children, and her home." The view that women should remain at home was reinforced when a third of male workers lost their jobs and became unemployed during the depression in the 1930s. Nazis argued that men were being replaced by female workers who, on average, only received 66% of men's wages.

During the election campaign in 1932, Adolf Hitler promised that if he gained power he would take 800,000 women out of employment within four years. In August 1933, a law was passed that enabled married couple to obtain loans to set up homes and start families. To pay for this, single men and childless couples were taxed more heavily. The decline in unemployment after the Nazis gained power meant that it was not necessary to force women out of manual work. However, action was taken to reduce the number of women working in the professions. Married women doctors and civil servants were dismissed in 1934 and from June 1936 women could no longer act as judges or public prosecutors. Hitler's hostility to women was shown by his decision to make them ineligible to jury service because he believed them to be unable to "think logically or reason objectively, since they are ruled only by emotion."

When Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933 he appointed Gertrud Scholtz-Klink as Reich Women's Leader and head of the Nazi Women's League. A good orator, Scholtz-Klink's main task was to promote male superiority and the importance of childbearing. In one speech she pointed out that "the mission of woman is to minister in the home and in her profession to the needs of life from the first to last moment of man's existence."

In July 1934 Scholtz-Klink was appointed as head of the Women's Bureau in the German Labor Front. She now had responsibility for persuading women to work for the good of the Nazi government. In 1938, she argued that "the German woman must work and work, physically and mentally she must renounce luxury and pleasure."

Once girls reached the age of 10 they could join the Jungmädel, one of the sections of the Hitler Youth. At 14 they entered the Bund Deutscher Mädel. (German Girls' League). This included a year of farm or domestic service. Female guardians trained them and their overall leader was Gertrud Scholtz-Klink.

In the year before the Nazis came to power there were 18,315 women students in Germany's universities. By 1939 this number had fallen to 5,447. However, during the Second World War the trend was reversed as men were called out to join the German armed forces and by 1944 there were 28,378 women students. Hitler's outspoken anti-feminism drove large numbers of women to join left-wing political groups. In October 1933, the Nazis opened the first concentration camp for women at Moringen. By 1938 the camp was unable to accommodate the growing number of women prisoners and a second one was built at Lichtenburg in Saxony. The following year another one was opened in Ravensbruck.

Primary Sources

(1) Adolf Hitler, speech to the NSDAP Women's Organization (September 1934)

*The slogan "emancipation of women" was invented by Jewish intellectuals. If the man's world is said to be the State, his struggle, his readiness to devote his powers to the service of the community, then it may perhaps be said that the woman's in a smaller world. For her world is her husband, her family, her children, and her home. But what would become of the greater world if there were no one to tend and care for the smaller one? The great world cannot survive if the smaller world is not stable. We do not consider it correct for the women to interfere in the world of the man. We consider it natural if these two worlds remain distinct.*
(2) G. Zienef, Education for Death (1942)
I spent an hour with the principal, a very friendly, neat lady of fifty. She explained that every class in school was built around a course called Frauenenschaften, activities of women. This general subject was divided into: Handarbeit (handwork), Hauswirtschaft (domestic science, cooking, house and garden work), and most important, the Pflege course (eugenics, and hygiene, devoted to a study of the reproductive organs, both male and female, conception, birth, racial purity, infant care, family welfare).
She told me that the Fuehrer wanted the girls to feel that their bodies were more important for the State than their minds. He wanted girls to be proud of their bodies. He wanted them to get interested in the bodies of their sweethearts. If a girl had a healthy body, fit for childbirth, she should be proud to display it to advantage.

(3) Adolf Hitler, speech (September 1935)
The so-called granting of equal rights to women, which Marxism demands, in reality does not grant equal rights but constitutes a deprivation of rights, since it draws the woman into an area in which she will necessarily be inferior.
The woman has her own battlefield. With every child that she brings into the world, she fights her battle for the nation.

(4) Isle McKee was a member of the German Girls' League, later recalled her experiences in her autobiography.
We were told from a very early age to prepare for motherhood, as the mother in the eyes of our beloved leader and the National Socialist Government was the most important person in the nation. We were Germany's hope in the future, and it was our duty to breed and rear the new generation of sons and daughter. These lessons soon bore fruit in the shape of quite a few illegitimate small sons and daughters for the Reich, brought forth by teenage members of the League of German Maidens. The girls felt they had done their duty and seemed remarkably unconcerned about the scandal.

(5) Jutta Rudiger, heard Adolf Hitler speak in Dusseldorf in 1932.
It was a huge hall and everyone was waiting for Hitler to arrive... I must say it was an electrifying atmosphere. Even before 1933 everybody was waiting for him as if he was a savior. Then he went to the podium. I remember it all went quiet, and he started to speak in his serious voice. Calm, slow, and then he got more and more enthusiastic. I must admit, I can't remember exactly what he actually said. But my impression afterwards was: this is a man who does not want anything for himself, but only thinks about how he can help the German people.

(6) Nazi Racial Policy Bureau, ten rules to be observed when considering a marriage partner (1934)
Remember you are a German.
Remain pure in mind and spirit!
Keep your body pure!
If hereditarily fit, do not remain single!
Marry only for love.
Being a German, only choose a spouse or similar or related blood!
When choosing your spouse, inquire into his or her forebears!
Health is essential to outward beauty as well!
Seek a companion in marriage, not a playmate.
Hope for as many children as possible! Your duty is to produce at least four offspring in order to ensure the future of the national stock.
(7) Liselotte Katscher was a member of the National Socialist German Workers Party who worked as a nurse. She later recalled how a sixteen-year old girl was sterilized because she was deemed unfit for motherhood. Henny was examined by a doctor who diagnosed a slight feeble-mindedness - in my opinion it was only a slight feeble-mindedness, and they decided that she should be sterilized. I thought about it a great deal at the time, and I felt sorry for the girl, but it was the law, and the doctors had decided. I personally took her to the maternity ward in the hospital where it took place. But I never got rid of the doubt in my mind that the decision was too harsh. I formed the impression when dealing with this young girl that she was perfectly capable of leading a normal life. The tragedy was that she was released very soon after this, then got a job and met a nice young man, and was now not allowed to marry him because of her sterilization.

(8) Martha Dodd, My Years in Germany (1939)

Young girls from the age of ten onward were taken into organizations where they were taught only two things: to take care of their bodies so they could bear as many children as the state needed and to be loyal to National Socialism. Though the Nazis have been forced to recognize, through the lack of men, that not all women can get married. Huge marriage loans are floated every year whereby the contracting parties can borrow substantial sums from the government to be repaid slowly or to be cancelled entirely upon the birth of enough children. Birth control information is frowned on and practically forbidden. Despite the fact that Hitler and the other Nazis are always ranting about "Volk ohne Raum" (a people without space) they command their men and women to have more children. Women have been deprived for all rights except that of childbirth and hard labor. They are not permitted to participate in political life - in fact Hitler's plans eventually include the deprivation of the vote; they are refused opportunities of education and self-expression; careers and professions are closed to them.

(9) Joseph Goebbels, speech in Munich (1939)

Women have the task of being beautiful and bringing children into the world, and this is by no means as coarse and old-fashioned as one might think. The female bird preens herself for her mate and hatches her eggs for him. In exchange, the mate takes care of gathering the food and stands guard and wards off the enemy.

(10) Adolf Hitler, speech on 26th January 1942.

I detest women who dabble in politics. And if their dabbling extends to military matters it becomes utterly unendurable. In no section of the Party has a woman ever had the right to hold even the smallest post. In 1924 we had a sudden upsurge of women who were interested in politics. They wanted to join the Reichstag, in order to raise the moral level of that body, so they said. I told them that 90 per cent of the matters dealt with by parliament were masculine affairs, on which they could not have opinions of any value. Gallantry forbids one to give women an opportunity of putting themselves in situations that do not suit them.