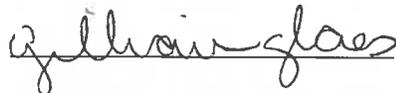


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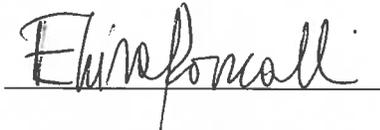
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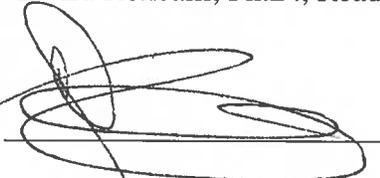
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CARROLL COLLEGE

THE WOMEN WHO SAID “YES” TO HITLER: AN EXAMINATION OF GUILT IN
THE THIRD REICH

A THESIS PAPER SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIRMENTS FOR
GRADUATION HONORS

BY

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Finally, I show appreciation for my mother, who read every draft of this paper. She helped me grapple with everything from grammar to questions of guilt and innocence. I dedicate this paper to her for her loving support.

ABSTRACT

The rise of the National Socialists and the horrors that followed are one of the darkest episodes of human history. Hitler's rise to power and his subsequent acts of war and genocide are typically seen as the work of men; yet women too had their roles to play. The following paper makes the case that women who supported the regime whether by joining as Nazis, participating in National Socialist programs, or working directly in the regime like film director Leni Riefenstahl deserve a measure of culpability. It examines firstly the Weimar Republic, Nazi ideology as pertaining to women, Hitler and his prominent follower's viewers including Nazi women's leader Gertrud Scholtz-Klink. The next chapter delves into the problems of population growth and women's reproductive role as well as the regime's means of increasing family size, including propaganda and the mother's cross. This chapter focuses on the controversial *lebensborn* program. The final chapter hones in on an individual, Leni Riefenstahl, infamous creator of the propaganda film "Triumph of the Will."

The argument of this paper relies on a variety of sources including Hitler's manifesto *Mein Kampf*, various speeches of Nazi officials and diaries. It also utilizes accounts of women after the war, journals produced during the Third Reich and finally Leni Riefenstahl's works, her memoir, and the documentary produced concerning her life. Secondary sources, such as articles written about Riefenstahl, books examining Adolf Hitler and other leading Nazis are also examined. Overall, this paper aims to delve into issues of responsibility and guilt. Though she may not have marched into battle or gassed innocents, there is a case to be made that through the support of ordinary and

extraordinary women like Leni Riefenstahl, Adolf Hitler's regime was able for a brief time to prosper.

INTRODUCTION

Guardian of morality. Protector of society. Nurturer. Worker. Homemaker. These are not functions naturally viewed as tainted with evil. To be an ordinary woman living under the shadow of the fascist regime of National Socialism does not relegate one to the deepest circle of Hell. Yet women living with the regime, common women who signed up for Adolf Hitler's various programs hold a degree of culpability as enablers of the horrors of Hitler's regime. Without their support, whether they took advantage of various Nazi programs or make films for the National Socialists, the success of the Third Reich may not have been facilitated. The subject of women's roles in the Third Reich is a broad one. Consequently, only women who were considered genetically valuable* and thus an essential cog of the machine that was the Third Reich will be examined in this chapter.

Initially, one must examine the conditions that allowed the swastika to triumph over the democracy of the Weimar Republic, tracing this development back to the end of the Great War and Germany's hatred of the Versailles Treaty. Nazi ideology set up guidelines for treatment of women, however, their actual role in society differed from the philosophy. Hitler, as well as many of his underlings, held fervent opinions on women's roles. Heinrich Himmler, the head of the *Waffen SS*, was notable because his loudly voiced views were so non-traditional. Women's leader Gertrud Scholtz-Klink's speeches will further be examined.

The second chapter examines Germany's decreased population and the desire for greater population growth. Women specifically had an important role to play in this and

* According to the Nazis, the most genetically valuable person was Aryan. Under Nazi definition, to be of Aryan blood referred to an individual who was a non-Jewish Caucasian, notably Nordic.

the regime offered a variety of incentives. These programs were typically beneficial to women; however the Divorce Law marks a program more advantageous for men. More notorious Nazi programs, such as the contentious *Lebensborn* homes will also be examined.

The final chapter looks at the culpability of a single individual. Film director Leni Riefenstahl, though drastically different than most women under National Socialism, also acts as an enabler. During her life she produced numerous films which worked as propaganda for the Nazis. While never a National Socialist party member, she too deserves a measure of guilt for her role in the regime.

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND, IDEOLOGY, AND REICHSFRAUENFÜHRERIN

Men may build worlds — but a people stands or falls with its women.
-Adolf Hitler as quoted in *NS Frauen Warte*, April, 1943

The National Socialist movement sees the man and the woman as equal bearers of Germany's future. It asks, however, for more than in the past: that each should first completely accomplish the tasks that are appropriate to his or her nature.

-Reichsfrauenführerin Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, “Deutsch sein — heißt stark sein. Rede der Reichsfrauenführerin Gertrud Scholtz-Klink zum Jahresbeginn,” *N.S. Frauen-Warte*, 1936

The Weimar Years: Paving the Way for Nazi Dictatorship

In order for the Third Reich to flourish, a strong foundation must have first been laid; the Weimar Republic, Germany's first democracy, helped to create an environment which ushered in this National Socialist movement. After the Great War, Germany was forced to accept the Treaty of Versailles or *der Diktat*, a term favored by the Germans which referred to the humiliating document they were obligated to follow. Among other things, the Versailles Treaty reduced Germany's military and took some territory away, for instance giving Alsace-Lorraine to France.¹ Against this backdrop, the Weimar Republic, Germany's first democracy, existed from 1918 until 1933. Named for the city where the new government was formed, this period was famous overflowing with artistic development. The renowned Bauhaus was born, an architectural school whose influence is seen in modern architecture. Great War veteran Eric Maria Remarque penned his famed anti-war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1929 and Berlin blossomed into a new center for modern culture known for its cabaret.² Yet from this period famous for liberalism, the seeds of the National Socialist regime were sown. People began to distrust

this new government, as many believed in the *Dolchstoss Legende*, or the idea that “left wing ‘Jewish’ revolutionaries and ‘traitors... [were alleged] to have stabbed the army” in the back.³ This belief was rampant across Germany, held by professors and presidents alike.⁴

Yet how did the fledgling democracy of the Weimar Republic give way to the marches and hysteria of the *National Sozialistische Arbeiter Partei*, better known as the National Socialists for *der Führer*?* To understand how the Weimar Republic laid the foundation for the Nazis, consider this excerpt from *Down there on a Visit*, a novel published in 1962 by Englishman Christopher Isherwood. He traced the connection between the freethinking democracy represented by the lifting of social mores and the strictly controlled, often violent Nazi government:

I’m sure that [a young German friend] instinctively feels a relation between the “cruel” ladies in boots who used to ply their trade outside the [department stores] and the young thugs in Nazi uniforms who are out there nowadays pushing the Jews around. When one of the booted ladies recognized a promising customer, she used to grab him, haul him into a cab and whisk him off to be whipped. Don’t the SA boys do exactly the same thing with *their* customers- except that their whipping is in fatal earnest? Wasn’t one kind of psychological dress rehearsal for the other?⁵

Yet behind the culture and innovation of Weimar years lurked ominous uncertainty. The report given by the Reparations Committee, a group whose function was to determine the monetary value of the damage caused, valued Germany’s payments at 132 billion gold marks or 32 billion dollars.⁶ Eventually, with the Compromise of 1929, the reparations payments were set at an amount greatly below 132 billion.⁷ The future loomed dimly ahead, overloaded with debt and insecurity. Even the language of reparations documents reflects this loss of faith in humanity; “our general knowledge of

* *Der Führer* translates to “the leader.” It was Adolf Hitler’s designation.

human nature suggests that such conflicts may at any time occur.”⁸ Germany was not given a voice at these reparations meetings.⁹ In September of 2010, Germany paid the final reparations payment, a sum of £60 million, totaling to £22 billion.¹⁰

Ordinary folk struggled to comprehend why Germany was saddled with the majority of the blame for the First World War. They saw even the compromise as “economic servitude” which the fatherland would have to endure for the next 59 years.¹¹ In the wreckage of the First World War lay a destroyed generation; over 32 million dead lay strewn on the battlefields and in the wreckage of cities. Germany alone had lost seven million.¹²

Enter the *National Sozialistische Arbeiter Partei*, a party with a 25-point program advocating central government and the hope that Germany would “wake up!”¹³ Among other objectives, this program “demand[ed] land and territory for the sustenance of our people, and colonization for our surplus population,” and asserted that only those of Nordic blood were citizens of Germany.¹⁴ Charismatic Austrian Adolf Hitler stepped in when Germans desperately needed strong guidance and leadership. Using his skills as orator and agitator, he stirred up rising emotions against the Weimar government.

Initially, Nazis did not enjoy a large following; in 1928, they received only 2.6 per cent of the vote for the Reichstag or Parliament.¹⁵ A variety of factors allowed the party’s success. The victorious Entente nations, France, Britain and the United States were unwilling to accept a larger measure of guilt for the Great War. Article 231 of the Versailles Treaty, known as the War Guilt Clause gauged Germany’s responsibility, determining that Germany was responsible for the harm caused by this war to end all wars, as this conflict was “imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her

allies.”¹⁶ Besides simplifying a complex problem, this rankled Germans who believed the blood was on the hands of all implicated nations, unvictorious or otherwise. “The demand is made that we shall acknowledge that we alone are guilty of having caused the war,” wrote Count Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau, the German foreign minister.”Such a confession in my mouth would be a lie.”¹⁷

In addition, the lack of understanding and compliance of the international community to compromise, and the United States’ rejection of the League of Nations all paved the way to Hitler’s eventual success. In a correspondence between Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud, the two men discussed humanity’s “lust” for destruction and violence. Freud believed that the surest way to end conflict was the formation of a judiciary body such as the League of Nations. Yet the League, in his opinion, was impotent as it did not have the force to back up its rulings and could not act as an efficient peacekeeper.¹⁸ The collapse of the American economy, on October 27th, 1929, infamously referred to as Black Tuesday, sent waves throughout the rest of the world and further set the scene for the collapse of the Weimar government and Hitler’s ultimate success. The Nazis took control January 30, 1933 when Hitler was appointed Reich Chancellor by President Hindenburg. The curtain closed on the Weimar Republic; yet with this plot change, the play continued unabated.

Women: Leading the Path from Weimar to Hitler

Where were women during the Weimar years? While most women still sweated behind stoves and sinks, German women received the right of enfranchisement in 1919, as compared with American women who began to visit the voting booths in 1918. In our present time, it is easy to fall into the trap of assuming that the traditional role was a

given for a German women; yet “over 10 percent of delegate to the 1919 National Assembly were women.”¹⁹ Women in Germany were increasingly familiar with politics or power; consider American women, who were not given the right to run for office until 1920.

Far more common than women running for office were women who simply exercised their right to vote. While some historians highlight the idea that women voted like their husbands— implying that females are passive followers of their husbands— it seems expected that like-minded people marry like. Yet, even though some couples may have been politically comparable, other women saw it as the wife modifying herself for her husband. “They all vote *exactly* the same as their husbands,” says Frau Ellen Frey, born in 1915. “My daughter, too, who grew up completely differently [votes like her husband]... they always, always, adjust themselves to the men. I never heard that the men adjust themselves to the women.”²⁰ This decision by a wife to alter her beliefs to suit her husband is still a conscious one that employs free agency. Women could not hide behind the cloak of “voting like their husbands” if they voted in the National Socialists even if they were following in the footsteps of the primary breadwinner.

Claudia Koonz, in her work *Mothers in the Fatherland* examines what drove women into the arms of National Socialism. After the advent of flappers, what pushed women into desiring a government which had little room or want for them? Even Hitler stated that “the Nazi Revolution will be an entirely male event.”²¹ Some wives went along with their husbands, but many women voluntarily flocked to the Führer. More than one German expressed surprise at female Nazis. “What! *Women* at this rally? To be a Nazi man, you have to be pretty mixed up, but a woman who wears the swastika must be

really nuts.”²² Yet, the regime did appeal to women in a variety of ways. They felt just as disconnected as men post-Versailles treaty, and as they watched the old world crumble, surely they felt pangs of nostalgia to return to life ruled by a strong leader. Nazi women were offered their own reality, a “separate sphere” apart from the militaristic world of men.²³ The return to traditional roles Hitler advocated brought some to the ranks as clearly as it turned others away in disgust. Within the first year of its inception, women numbered one in ten of the National Socialist members.²⁴

Nazi Ideology

What tenets and values of National Socialism drew people towards the movement? Much like other political ideologies, the principles and creed of National Socialism often failed to live up to its ideals in practice. Theories do not translate to action; while National Socialists may have been more successful rendering idea to reality than their Italian counterparts under Mussolini for instance, National Socialist beliefs faced disparities when faced applied to the day-to-day. On the subject of women’s role in German society, Hitler preached *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*[†] but there was often little practicality in keeping women exclusively in the nursery, kitchen, or church. During the First World War, women took the place of men in places of employment previously closed to them. But, regardless of this failure to live up to practice, the dogma illustrated how the leadership and followers of the National Socialists viewed the place and duties of women.

In Nazi doctrine, women were primarily viewed as the spoke around which the wheels of family rotated. According to a pamphlet passed out to children, “the family

[†] Translates to nursery, kitchen, church. Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Society* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1975), 196.

should be a cradle, a home, a fortress.”²⁵ Both nurturing enough to foster strong members of society, and sufficiently stalwart to keep threats away, each member of the family played his or her role in the scheme of the Third Reich. The following joke illustrated how much the regime had infiltrated the family: “Father is in the Party, mother in the *Frauenschaft* [women’s group], son in the *HJ* [Hitler Youth], daughter in the *BDM* [Girl’s Hitler Youth]. Where does the ideal National Socialist family meet then? At the Reich Party Day in Nuremberg!”²⁶ This strict management of each individual, replete with careful indoctrination, was necessary to the Nazis as a way to repress dissent of policies and foster supporters of the regime. The family was seen as a tool, one that could bring about salvation or defeat. The Nazis viewed “the very existence of the family [as an] obstacle to the Nazis’ attempt at totalitarian control.”²⁷ Control the microcosm that is the family and one could control a civilization, in this situation Germany and the areas she hoped to conquer. The Nazis saw the mother as the heart of the National Socialist family.

The “gentler sex” often found themselves wondering if “this state, built by strong male hands, have any place at all for us women?”²⁸ Women, with the ability to reproduce, were especially tied into the scheme of a genetically superior race. Women could be wives or workers, but their chief duty as Aryan women was to produce children. Functions of ancient institutions, such as matrimony, were perverted to support this objective. The purpose of marriage, as outlined in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, was solely the production of offspring. “...Marriage cannot be an end in itself, but must serve the one higher goal, the increase and preservation of the species and the race. This alone is its meaning and its task.”²⁹ Even female education would be weighted towards instruction on motherhood.³⁰

Critics of National Socialism stated that this emphasis on childbirth relegated women to little more than the position of “breeding cattle.”³¹ In a speech given in the town of Cologne, on October 13th, 1934 the director of the Nazi Party Office of Racial Policy defends the National Socialist view. In his address to women, Dr. Walter Groß underscores the belief that not all people are equally worthy of procreating. “Let us work together,” he asserted.³² “So that in the future, as many people as possible will be able to serve the nation.”

The National Socialists viewed even the role of motherhood in a different light. “Nazis approved of everything that led back to the mythical, primordial basis of history, to blood, race, or the womb.”³³ In the end, the only road for the Third Reich and the Aryan man and woman was “the path of blood and race.”³⁴ Conceivably, the ideas of mother-worship appealed to women in ways that the modern way of thinking could not. It elevated maternity in a way that the contemporary world could not, making motherhood sacred. It robbed a family of the personal aspect of having children so that offspring produced were “for the state.” Moreover, placing motherhood on a pedestal permitted women to see themselves as “separate but equal” and accept a status that was often misogynistic. Although the Nazis seemingly vaulted women into a goddess-like position, the position of women was relegated to one basic function. Mother worship possessed an appearance of equality in that it saw women in a favorable light; tear the mask off and one finds the ugly face of misogyny.

Special days of celebration provide not only entertainment; holidays can be viewed as encapsulating the values and traditions a society holds dear. Consider Mother’s day, a seemingly innocent celebration of maternity and mother love. Motherhood was

politicized under the banner of the swastika. A mother's day card from 1944 contains quotes from Adolf Hitler and Minister of Propaganda and Enlightenment, Joseph Goebbels. "We all have but one thing that really makes our lives worth living on this earth: that is our own people," reads a statement by Hitler. "Our highest duty and holiest task is to preserve the people."³⁵ Titled, "For the Wives and Mothers of our Fallen on Mother's Day 1944," the card specified the mothers most venerated as those who had sent their sons or husbands to the battlefield. Included is an account by a war widow and mother whose son had also fallen. The mother declares that in her sorrow filled circumstance, work kept her going.³⁶ She stated "the mysterious connection of a mother to a child, from one to another! Having felt fully alive only after the birth of one's own child, one thinks she must perish with her sons. Back then, a young soldier wrote to me: 'It is easier for a soldier to die for the fatherland than for a mother to continue to live!'"³⁷ This testimonial emphasizes that without children a woman is not truly alive; it is with her children that she enters the web of life and civilization. Individuality is overshadowed by the weight of the people, so that "all mothers are our mothers, so all children are our children, our common responsibility, [and] the immortality of our people."³⁸

The Führer's Views: Public and Private

The sentiment found on this mother's day card can also be found in Adolf Hitler's attitude towards females. Men and women existed in separate but equal spheres; "... one might be tempted to say that the world of woman is a smaller world,"³⁹ Hitler stated to a crowd in Nuremberg, on September 8th, 1934. "For her world is her husband, her family, her children, and her house. But where world the greater world be if there were no one to care for the small world? How could the greater world survive if there were none to make

the cares of the smaller world the content of their lives?” Hitler allowed a Nazi Women’s Movement and a youth group for young girls, the Bund Deutscher Mädel. He declared that women to be the comrades of men, fighting not in opposition but in support.

Hitler’s focus was on the future generations of the *Volk*.[‡] The “point is The Child— that tiny creature which must be born and should grow strong, for in the child alone the whole life— struggle gains its meaning... it is a glorious sight, this golden youth of ours: we know that it is the Germany of the future when we shall be no more.”⁴⁰ In Hitler’s vision, women seemed to exist only for the benefit of those around them; their husbands, and of course, children. Those women in support of the Nazis saw him as a guardian of the weaker sex; the Führer “always bows in honor before the mothers of our people, and has reestablished the dignity of German womanhood.”⁴¹

Hitler personally preferred to associate with unassuming, docile women, females that presented no challenge and offered no opinions to clash with his. The Führer’s privately held views, like those of his followers, were more radical and often opposed his preaching. Even while he encouraged couples to wed, he belittled the institution. “The worst of marriage is that it creates demands,” stated the never-married leader. “That’s why it’s far better to keep a mistress.”⁴² He followed his own advice, keeping Eva Braun as a mistress until shortly before their suicide he married her.⁴³ Women, existing in separate *lebensraum* or living space, were in Hitler’s eyes fundamentally different creatures who revolved around the centers of their universes; men. A male, according to Hitler, “should be able to leave his stamp on a girl,” because it is what women desire.⁴⁴

Opinions of Key Nazi Figures

[‡] Volk translates to the concept of the “people” or “folk” of Germany.

The views of other important Nazi figures further illuminate the tenor of the times regarding women. Heinrich Himmler, the *Reichsführer* or leader of the *Waffen Schutzstaffel*- better known as the *Waffen SS*- held what may be dubbed bizarre or unusual beliefs on the function of women.⁴⁵ American reporter William Shirer described him as a man “who with his pince-nez looked like a harmless provincial schoolmaster, but who in reality was the brutal, dreaded chief of the *SS* and Gestapo, and, in the end, exterminator of the Jews.”⁴⁶ Himmler wished to change social perceptions of illegitimate births and adultery; alter “middle-class convention” so that these taboos would be encouraged.⁴⁷ He imagined a world in which procreation was not tied down by the shackles of marriage.

Another paragon of the Nazi party, ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, dubbed the Party “philosopher”⁴⁸ by Shirer, was unabashedly misogynistic towards women. In his work *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, he employs the words of philosophers to show, that as Aristotle asserted, “woman is woman by virtue of a certain lack of capability.”⁴⁹ Like others, he saw the female responsibility to be childbirth and rearing. The sexual liberalism of the Weimar frightened Rosenberg, as women were “the chosen preservers of the race,” who by reproducing with the unsavory could “also become the destroyers of all the foundations of the folkhood.”⁵⁰ Rosenberg asserted it was travesty for viable producers to breed with those who had unhealthy genetics; those of African descent and Jews were just a few that Rosenberg deemed detrimental to the Nordic race. Education should be open to the fairer sex, he emphasized, but this education is merited as “woman belongs deeply to the total life of the people”⁵¹ and not for individual, or selfish, benefit. Rosenberg rummaged through history, concluding that through its annuals very few notable women had tread.

No woman became one of the founders of our science. Woman could not create because she lacked the conceptualisation (sic) which is native only to man. There is no magic or power that permits creativity. It is simply a gift given only to man, never women... Woman has simply failed to produce or create lasting values of genius.⁵²

Women were incapable of higher functions, such as innovation or invention. It may seem incongruous to title women intrinsically uncreative when they are seen also the producers of a race; yet to have children or prepare a warm supper, in Rosenberg's mind, requires little mental creativity. These various views of men regarding women are remarkable; yet also important is the stance of leading women when considering their fellow females.

The Reichsfrauenführerin, the Reich's Women's Leader

Hess. Goebbels. Goering. These familiar names send shivers down the spine of the modern person. Scholtz-Klink? This individual was virtually unknown, though she possessed the highest rank given to women. The ranks of Nazi officials were filled with men; it was a reality that should not shock anyone that women were excluded from leadership positions. However, one may be surprised to learn that Hitler had a female counterpart titled the *Reichsfrauenführerin*. The leader of the Nazi women's organizations and the embodiment of German motherhood was Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, promoted to her position in 1934.⁵³ Largely seen as an impotent figurehead by other Nazi officials, Scholtz-Klink was a powerful speaker who had borne five children and raised six others. Under her authority was the Nazi Women's League the *NS-Frauenschaft* or NSF, the German Women's Enterprise,⁵⁴ in addition to the women's office of the German Labor Front.⁵⁵ The *NS-Frauenschaft* was the Nazi party's only women's magazine.

Scholtz-Klink elucidated women's positions and reached out to her colleagues in a way that men could not. Yet, her position as a female leader was itself a contradiction to Nazi ideology; she was a woman leader asserting that women, by nature, should not be leaders. Scholtz-Klink believed she lived in an extraordinary era; her lapse is to be forgiven as she only ventured out into the public sphere to join the battle. In a speech alongside Hitler's at the Women's Rally during the 1936 Nuremberg Rally, Scholtz-Klink declared that, "the German woman took her place alongside the German man when she realized that a struggle was going on... It was a battle between good and evil."⁵⁶

Conclusion

One must avoid the trap of retrospection and believe that the Weimar Republic was a step to the National Socialist regime. While the Weimar years did lay a foundation, it did not unavoidably lead to Hitler's rise. Women, those consigned to the primary role of mother, played a role in the success of National Socialism, especially at the polls. These women supported the ideology and views of principal men in the regime, such as Himmler, Rosenberg, and the Führer. These men's views are revealing as to women's place in the Reich and Fatherland. Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, a paradox herself, is a little known individual responsible for helping Aryan women down the right path. How does a woman, following the guidelines set out by these key figures deserve blame for the wreckage of the Third Reich? Was she a victim or perpetrator of sexist and racist beliefs? Women were strongly compelled to believe and accept Nazi philosophy. But in the end it came down to choice. Women who accepted this doctrine as truth were culpable for the success of a regime which slaughtered millions. Not only did they recognize the racist principles, but also policies which relegated them to a position that was separate and

unequal to men.⁵⁷ These women could be considered doubly as culpable because not only did they welcome a regime that caused the deaths of millions, but they rejected themselves as worthy and equal citizens.

CHAPTER 2

THE CULPABILITY OF PARTICIPANTS IN NATIONAL SOCIALISTS PROGRAMS

Not only one man, not only the SS, not only some perpetrators, but the whole society [took] part to stabilize this regime and make it possible.

- Simone Erpel, one of the curators of "Hitler and the Germans"

Those who play with the devil's toys will be brought by degrees to wield his sword.

-Richard Buckminster Fuller

The words 'Third Reich' or 'final solution' usually conjures up images of skeletal Nazi victims, swastikas or militant hordes of SS men.^{*} This period of history continues to fascinate while exposing the horrors humans are capable of committing against their fellow man and woman. Predictably, when one imagines the terrors of the Third Reich,[†] he or she might see them as perpetrated by men. It is true that a man typically held the rifle or flipped the switch to the gas chambers. Yet women, restricted to the role of wife or mother, held a measure of responsibility as enablers of the Third Reich. In their traditional role as protectors of *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*,[‡] women also sanctioned the atrocities committed under the banner of the swastika.

To live in an immoral society under a totalitarian regime does not inherently impart guilt to all members of the public. However, on an individual level one might find a housewife providing a warm supper for her SS husband or a woman who enrolls in a

^{*} *Waffen-Schutzstaffel*. Hitler's paramilitary group composed of the Führer's bodyguard, the Gestapo, Concentration camp guards, among others and under the leadership of Heinrich Himmler.

[†] Reich translates into empire; the Third Reich connotes the Nazi reign from 1933-45, the third empire after Bismarck and the Holy Roman Empire.

[‡] Translates to nursery, kitchen, church. Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Society* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1975), 196

cooking class provided by the Nazis. These instances remind one that ordinary people can act as a foundation for evil. By providing active or reactive support, “regular” women enabled Adolf Hitler to perpetrate horrors that continue to shock and disgust. How did certain Nazi legislation, propaganda, and programs place women among the legion of the culpable?

Population Growth in a Reduced Generation

As a result of mounting concern over repopulation, many convictions of the National Socialists were associated with population issues. Nazis subscribed to the principle that the Nordic people, popularly called the Aryan race, were supreme, ranking above the Slavs, Asiatic and Semitic races among others.¹ The Nuremberg Laws, passed in September of 1935, buttressed the belief of genetically superior Aryan blood. While the laws were part of the process of de-nationalizing and dehumanizing the Jews, the Nuremberg law was also purportedly instituted “for the safeguard of German blood and German honor.”² The principles outlined by the Reich’s Office for People’s Health instructed citizens to “want as many children as possible... [and] take a spouse only of the same or of Nordic blood,”³ making sure to inquire about the potential partner’s heritage. Another decree was “to marry only out of love.” Logical and generally accepted as a good marriage tactic, this principle is doubly insidious. The Nazis not only confirmed the idea that only those of valuable blood were worthy of consideration and love, but through this standard implied that a marriage for love would produce more children for the Führer.⁴

In order to obtain victory in “the struggle for world domination,” the German people had to increase their population.⁵ Germany possessed upwards of sixty million

citizens in 1933, yet these individuals produced less than a million live births.⁶ This was disconcerting to the Nazis, who believed it was their right and obligation as members of the Aryan race to rule all of Europe and the world. Some held that if the current trend continued not only would Germany's population diminish, but the "inhabitants of Berlin would dwindle to a scanty hundred thousand."⁷ A pamphlet passed out to children of fourteen years age who completed their requisite schooling highlighted the importance of procreation.⁸ Hitler's admonition that "the destruction of the family would mean the end of any higher level of humanity" set the importance to procreate as paramount.⁹

It would seem safe to infer that women workers were a fanciful notion of the previous liberal era if one examined solely Hitler's words. The *Führer* unflinchingly declared his feelings on the worth of women workers in comparison to mothers:

If today a female lawyer achieves great things and nearby there lives a mother with five, six, seven children, all of them healthy and well brought up, then I would say: from the point of view of the eternal benefit to our people the woman who has borne and brought up children and who has therefore given our nation life in the future, has achieved more and done more!¹⁰

Professional success paled when compared with one's duty to bloodline and the continuation of the race. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler asserted that "the German girl belongs to the state and with her marriage becomes a citizen."¹¹ In order to raise the disturbingly low birthrate, the German woman's primary responsibility was to produce children. Each member of the society imagined by the National Socialists had a role; men as soldiers, and women as the producers of soldiers. This way of thinking is by no way exclusive to Germany or to the interwar period; Fascist in Italy also subscribed to this attitude, as did post-war France. It is the unique aim of the Nazis that cast a sinister light on what in

many cultures was commonplace. For women, this meant a manipulation of traditional roles; the wholesome task of childrearing perverted into a function of the Third Reich.

Woman Warriors

Hitler equated childbirth with a “battle,” and thus the mother becomes a warrior in her own right; a soldier fighting “for the existence or non-existence of her people.”¹² A popular women’s magazine, *Frauen Warte* furthered this image. In 1939 with the advent of war, the magazine published “Life Must Win,” an article that juxtaposed men’s capacity to take life with women’s ability to give it. The article asserted that England and France, with their dwindling populations, wished to destroy Germany. The sacrifice of the soldiers was meaningless since “a military or political victory over our enemies [was] only half the battle, and could not guarantee Germany’s future or the Führer’s work. The decisive factor is the victory of life. And that is in the hands of our women and mothers.”¹³

The Third Reich further applied the metaphor of women as warriors. Fertile women who did not produce children “even if unmarried, could be compared with army deserters.”¹⁴ Women who disdained their role as mothers or questioned the regime faced stern retribution. Frau Liselotte Otting, returning home from the hospital after giving birth recalled gossip she heard about a neighbor who was seen as an enemy of the state and arrested. “When I was back home again, someone... in one of the nearby houses told me that some other woman in the area also had a son and said, ‘yet more cannon fodder,’ and she never even made it home.”¹⁵ What was her neighbor’s crime? She did not agree with the belief that her children belonged to the state. She realized they were pawns in the Führer’s hands and as a result lost her child.

Socialization began at an early age with the hope that not only would the indoctrinated marry sooner but have more children. Even schoolchildren were told that they hold the key to Germany's victory, and were the repository of "thousands of your ancestors who entrusted you with passing it [genetic material] on to future generations. The kin dies: that is the real death!"¹⁶ Children were taught to see themselves as parts of a greater machine; value was determined by genetic usefulness, i.e. "Aryan-ness."

Methods of Producing Large Families

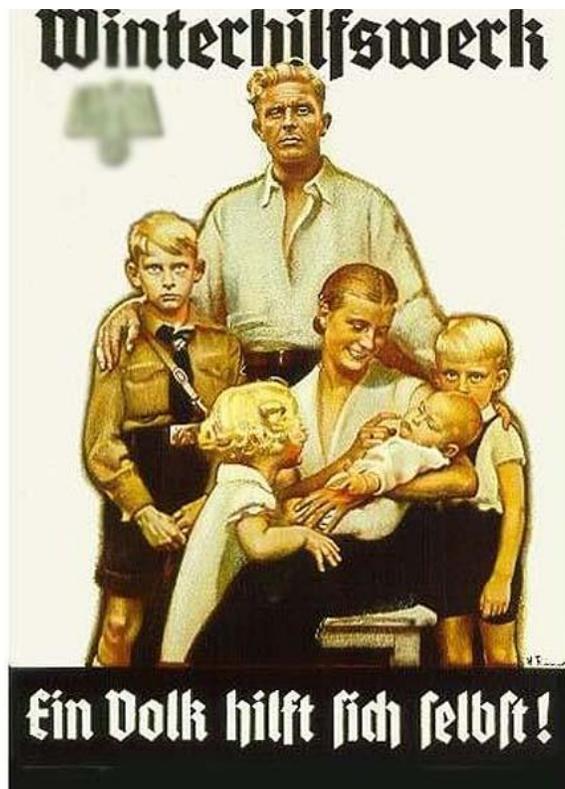
The Weimar Republic was a period famous for liberalism and modernity. It was a brief stage in German history that, according to the Nazis, had been rank with licentiousness and birth control. Hitler and his followers looked back disdainfully on the bygone republic they had disassembled, yet to them its mindset still infected the populace. During the Weimar years, there was a stigma against large, or *Kinderreich*¹⁷ families; they were seen as existing mainly in the poorer strata of society. Most of these large families lived in the country where children were an important labor force on their parents' farms. Approximately 75 percent of *Kinderreich*, or "child rich" families, had conceived or had a child before marriage.¹⁸ Upper and middle class families often raised just one or two children, not enough to satisfy the regimes need. *Kinderreich* families "experienced considerable difficulty in obtaining suitable houses... despite the regime's alleged concern for their welfare."¹⁹ Also, large families simply were forced to provide for more; a struggle in an age rampant with unemployment. In 1930, over five million people were unemployed with only two million of these receiving any unemployment benefits.²⁰ The National Socialist state had the significant dual task of de-stigmatizing the

large families and easing the difficulties experienced by the *Kinderreich*, an undertaking not to be underestimated.

The National Socialists employed their arsenal of propaganda, depicting happy, smiling renditions of large blond, Aryan families. Many illustrations pictured a contented woman nursing a child. These images concentrate on rural families, replete with sturdy well-fed children. One campaign highlighted famous German men hailing from large families;

Frederick the Great was the fourth of fourteen, Bismarck was the fourth of six, Mozart was the youngest of seven, Bach was the eighth of twelve and Schubert was the twelfth of fourteen. Hitler claimed that: 'if we had practiced the system of two-children families in the old days, Germany would have been deprived of her greatest geniuses... the exceptional being in a family is often the fifth, seventh, tenth or twelfth in the row.'²¹

Figure 1: Illustration of a Kinderreich family. Taken from the collection of Dr. Glaes.



Propaganda is helpful when changing the public's opinion on a subject; however, its ability to manipulate is never as persuasive as action. Coupled with the use of propaganda was the outlaw of birth control and abortions. It was projected that there were around 600,000 abortions a year, a figure that continued the abortion trends of the Weimar Republic.²² In February of 1933, the Nazis prohibited birth control organizations using the Law for the Protection of the People and the State.²³ However, it was difficult to change popular opinion, and in the beginning of 1941, "Himmler's Police Ordinance categorically banned the production and distribution of contraceptives."²⁴ Legislation passed in 1943 sentenced those providing abortions to death.²⁵ One popular saying went, "*lieber zehn auf dem Kissen wieeins auf dem Gewissen*," or "better ten on the pillow than one on the conscience."²⁶

Perhaps the greatest incentive to have more children was the legislation which intended to make life for *Kinderreich* families more comfortable and culturally acceptable. It was estimated that after the infertile Weimar years, "in compensation for every childless marriage the nation needed a family of six or more children."²⁷ Marriage loans gave money to newlyweds which would be paid off incrementally. These instrumental loans were paid off at one percent a month.²⁸ This plan, part of the June 1933 "Law to Reduce Unemployment," gave an amount which, not exceeding 1,000 Reich's marks, went towards domestic items.²⁹ After the birth of one child, 25% of the loan would be erased.³⁰ "I got thirty marks per child from the Hitler government," said Frau Wilhelmine Hafterkamp, mother to ten children and wife to a Nazi party member. "When one had ten children... one should join the party... [I received] fifty marks per child. That was a lot of money. I sometimes got more 'child money' [*Kindergeld*] than my

husband earned.”³¹ One had to have at least four children to take full advantage of the marriage loan.³²

The marriage loan system further upheld other beliefs in Nazi ideology. Upon acceptance into the loan system, women had to leave their jobs, opening up work for men. It was necessary for acceptance that the bride had previously worked; she could not work again unless her family’s income fell below a certain level, or until the loan was paid.³³ Accepting a marriage loan acknowledged support of two vital National Socialist beliefs concerning women; first, that women’s primary function should be a mother, and secondly that a mother ought to reproduce prolifically. Even if women did not personally support these values, by utilizing programs they gave tacit encouragement.

Marriage loans were also intended to stimulate early marriage. In practice, they acted as an incentive, not a reason, for couples to marry. “23.4 per cent of all receiving loans during the first nine months of the plan, who produced children within this period, were almost all pregnant at the time of application.”³⁴ While not revealing in itself, it is illuminating that during this same period, marriages rose in the city of Düsseldorf while illegitimate births fell.³⁵ While the intent of this legislation was to produce more children, women used this program to benefit their existing families. Times were especially tough, and any opportunities were grasped quickly with little thought towards repercussions.

The National Socialist state employed less powerful ways of inducing women to produce many children. The Cross of Honor of the German Mother recognized fertile women and the medal was embellished with the phrase “the child ennobles the Mother!”

³⁶ The Nazis, devotees of pomp and pageantry, demanded that the Hitler Youth salute

these women.³⁷ Himmler saw great potential in the Cross of Honor and position of mothers, foreseeing:

After the war we'll have an entirely new system of honors and titles... the Mother's Cross is the best of all; one day it'll be the greatest honor in Greater Germany. Sentries will have to present arms to a woman with the Mother's Cross in gold... You'll find that a delegation of women with the Mother's Cross will have precedence on parade over the Führer's bodyguard- and just consider the effect of that!³⁸

By accepting the Mother's Cross, a woman was accepting the Third Reich's delegated role for her. Many mothers did not acknowledge that the regime which took away their husbands and sons was the same one awarding them for their children. "... When I had the ninth child, I got the gold [Mother's Cross]," said Frau Wilhelmine Haferkamp, "I was proud of it."³⁹ This same woman used to feed prisoners of the Nazis, yet could not see the contradiction of her actions. Some women could separate the regime which rewarded them for their sacrifice as a mother with the government that drafted their husbands and sons and persecuted the innocent. One notable mother, Frau Dr. Margret Blerch, spurned the award, explaining "when one had five children, one got an Honorable Mother's Cross, *nicht?* From the Nazis. Sort of a mark of distinction. And I sent it back to them. I said I won't allow myself to be rewarded. I didn't bear my children for Hitler. But that was bad to say."⁴⁰ While it is safe to assume that women did not become mothers simply to receive the decoration of a Mother's Cross, the Cross exalted motherhood and was an inexpensive method the Nazis employed to put their ideals into practice.

Propaganda, marriage loans, and the Mother's Cross all in some way benefited women. Conversely, the Divorce Law leaned heavily towards the benefit of men. As an

element of the Marriage Law of 1938, divorce was not as incompatible with Nazi ideals of marriage and childbirth as some many instinctively think. The dissolution of unsuitable marriages would, the Nazis hoped, increase chances of new marriages and children.⁴¹ This new law allowed couples to divorce on grounds of infertility and “if his or her spouse refused, without good cause, to allow the begetting or conceiving of offspring” or if the partner had an abortion or used birth control.⁴²

Paragraph fifty-five of the Divorce Law was a particularly volatile section of this new decree. It allowed for the termination of marriage if a couple had been separated for three years and if their union had “broken down irretrievably.”⁴³ In 1941, over 20,000 men and 6,000 women used paragraph fifty-five to end their marriages; infertility contributed to 383 divorces and unwillingness to have children brought nearly 2,000 dissolutions.⁴⁴ Women chafed against this new law; it allowed men, in some circumstances, to forgo maintenance or support to ex-wives. “For pronatalist reasons men were to be relieved of the need to pay support, if possible, so that they would be enabled to enter a new marriage and start a new family.”⁴⁵ Ex-wives and their children felt discarded in a state which professed them fundamental to in the success of the Third Reich. Women felt forced to work in a society which told them that the best place for them was at home. The Divorce Law and resulting paragraph fifty-five provide a glance into the true desires of the National Socialist state; women were but tools, used for their ability to reproduce and abandoned when they could no longer fulfill this function.

Home Economics Classes and Recuperation Homes

Traditionally, women were responsible not only for bringing children into the world, but for caring for and cleaning up after them too. The Nazis believed that female

arts, such as cooking and housekeeping, were not completely ingrained to women. These skills could always use some polishing. Consequently, schools educating women on “womanly duties” were provided. The *Deutsches Frauenwerk*, or German Women’s Work, was an association that along with the National Socialism Women’s Organization set up over 400 schools for women.⁴⁶ In 1940, the organization boasted a staff of over 4,000, it claimed to have “trained more than 2.5 million German women in courses of 25-50 hours.”⁴⁷ Four years later, the number of trained women expanded to five million, including city dwellers, country folk and even working women.⁴⁸ Though the majority of the emphasis was still on the childbearing, now Nazis realized “the task is also to provide short-term but intensive courses in marriage and the family that will build a good foundation for the future life of those girls who are engaged, but have neither the time nor the money to participate in longer training course in home economics.”

⁴⁹Courses lasted for six weeks and “bride schools” included housing, board, and instruction. The full price of 135 marks could be waived or discounted and many women received financial aid in order to attend the courses.⁵⁰ Fiancées of members in the *SS* or *SA* could obtain a full ride scholarship; it was important for these brides of elite to have feminine skills.⁵¹ By 1940, the classes boasted 2.5 million indoctrinated pupils, women who had attended courses lasting 25-50 hours.⁵² An issue of the *Frauen Warte*, titled “An Illustrated Report from the Reich Brides’ and Housewives’ School at Husbäke in Oldenburg,” gives a young wife’s account of her 6 week course.⁵³ The newlywed, at first experiencing some hesitation on what to prepare for dinner, remembers her time at bride school. She “has forgotten her job, which she thought she could not live without” and

instead her thoughts revolve around her household tasks. However, she does not see them as a trial, and it is “with cheerful resolve [that] she goes about her day’s work!”⁵⁴

Figure 2: "An Illustrated Report from the Reich Brides' and Housewives' school in Oldenburg."



For wives and mothers who were fatigued by their families and harried by housework, there was an option of checking into convalescence homes. Much like the bride schools, this service was “politicized,” and held the goal of “[toughening] up German women for their tasks in the house and family.”⁵⁵ Offering mothers and wives a chance to escape the trials of daily life, these houses professed to be for the good of the

German people. In 1934, 40,340 women attended a recuperation house, and in 1938 this number swelled to 77,723.⁵⁶ These courses conceivably became more popular as word of the benefits spread. Yet it should come as no surprise that most women were more concerned with the practical aspects of these programs. “The new Nazi courses with explicitly racial policy themes were far less popular than those with a practical focus.”⁵⁷ Women accepted the political indoctrination in these programs because the improvement to their lives received outweighed, in their opinion, the Nazi instruction. The directors of the programs bemoaned the difficulties of inspiring women to attend the civic courses while applauding the popularity of childcare classes.⁵⁸

Marriage and *Lebensborn*

So keen was the need for more children in Nazi Germany by the leadership that the traditional boundaries of motherhood were relaxed by leaders of the state. Heinrich Himmler, the head of Hitler’s private bodyguard, the *Schutzstaffel*, and the leader of the *Waffen SS* as well as the Gestapo, held strident opinions on the subject. Himmler recognized that because of the hostilities of the First World War, German women greatly outnumbered the men; “the surplus of women in the population” surged “from 800,000 before the war to 2.8 million after it... many women potential mothers would therefore fail to find a husband... [and] the birth rate would continue to decline”.⁵⁹ The total percentage of German males between the ages of 15-49 killed in World War One was a shocking 12.5%; a figure which translated into 4% of the total population decimated.⁶⁰

To the National Socialists, it seemed an unforgivable crime that these women would not be able to contribute to society simply because of societal conventions. Himmler was known for holding more radical views on the subject. He was a strong

advocate of bigamy, asserting that the current institution of marriage was harmful to society.

Marriage in its existing form is the Catholic Church's satanic achievement; marriage laws are in themselves immoral... but with bigamy, each wife would act as a stimulus to the other so that both would try to be their husband's dream woman... the fact that a man has to spend his entire existence with one wife drives him to... deceive her... the result is indifference between the partners. They avoid each other's embraces and the final consequence is that they don't have children... on the other hand, the husband never dares to have children by the woman with who is carrying on an affair... simply because middle class morality forbids it.⁶¹

Although the practice of polygamy never gained wide acceptance, Himmler reaped more success in his campaign for social acceptance of illegitimate births. The *Lebensborn* house was a highly controversial program which was seen by some as propagating illegitimate births while aspiring to act as a "fount of life."⁶² These buildings took in pregnant mothers, married or unmarried. Himmler asserted *Lebensborn* houses were established "primarily... for the brides and wives of our young SS men, and secondarily for illegitimate mothers of good blood."⁶³ It was the "hereditary health and blood of the parents that were important."⁶⁴ Women who were incapable of caring for their babies could leave the child at the *Lebensborn* house for a period of a year, returning to claim the child if her circumstances changed or she could entrust baby to "foster parents, usually to SS leaders who were childless or had just one or two children."⁶⁵

The program as outlined by Himmler was intended to care for large "racially and genetically valuable" families, to care after pregnant and postpartum mothers and the children produced.⁶⁶ The program had a more sinister side to it; the appropriating of racially valuable children from occupied countries.⁶⁷ "This is the opposite example of the

Holocaust,” said *Lebensborn* child Gisela Heidenreich, result of a union between a SS officer and an unmarried mother.⁶⁸ Heidenreich was one of 6,000 to 8,000 individuals born in a German *Lebensborn* from 1936-1945.⁶⁹ She was not told of her origins, and only deduced her past after watching a television documentary.

Himmler stated that the ratio of legitimate to illegitimate babies in the *Lebensborn* program was “about 50-50, more likely 60-40 in favour of the legitimately born babies”.⁷⁰ In actuality, a study of 541 women in the home between May 1938 and September 1941 revealed that only 45 percent of the children produced were legitimate; 296 of these women were unmarried.⁷¹ While it is true that more illegitimate children were born than legitimate, these homes did not act like the “breeding houses” critics asserted they were. Still, these homes were not accepted by conventional Germans who saw the facilities as a reward for promiscuity.⁷² Instead, *Lebensborn* homes acted as an additional building block of the regime.



Figure 3: Photo of *Lebensborn* home. Taken from online newspaper *Die Gazette*.

There were also social incentives for these unmarried mothers. These women were now permitted to eschew their unmarried and somewhat girlish title of *fräulein*, and if desired take on the married and more respectable title of ‘*frau*.’⁷³ In response to unmarried women losing their employment after having children, even the Minister of

Justice allowed that “the bearing of an illegitimate child should not itself ever be made a reason for dismissal.”⁷⁴ This program of allowance and support was stridently opposed by many, including the Catholic Church, which viewed it as immoral and profligate. The benefits of these relaxed moral standards came with strings attached, further binding women to the totalitarian regime. Many unwed mothers celebrated the new support they received. One happy *Lebensborn* mother wrote,

It is my particular pleasure to tell you that the desire to have a child is apparent in Mecklenburg [*Lebensborn* home] implanted even more firmly than it was. I can give you the example of my own experience. I had my first child at 18, when people said it was too early. When I had another one directly afterwards, people said I wouldn't be able to enjoy life. But now that I have had my third nobody says anything anymore. Everyone realizes what a marvelous thing I have done because in the course of this war people have come to understand that you can't offer anything more worthwhile than a whole brood of children.⁷⁵

Yet even with the apparent freedom that *Lebensborn* afforded these women, there were strict rules to be followed; “mothers in the SS's *Lebensborn* homes should not be permitted to use lipstick, to paint their nails, or to shave their eyebrows.”⁷⁶ Women were expected to act conservatively, and these measures subjected them to Nazi authority.

Himmler may have held vested interest in the continuation of this program. He made a statement in 1940 that, “the fathers of 90 per cent of the illegitimate children born in *Lebensborn* homes are serving soldiers.”⁷⁷ SS members had to go through a strict process of selection to ensure that their blood was pure, and Himmler advocated the value of illegitimate children; “providing that its parents were both ‘racially valuable... an illegitimate child [was] as valuable as a legitimate one.”⁷⁸ This is ironic, considering the SS saw themselves as a family organizations whose motto was “my honor is my loyalty.”⁷⁹ While this was yet another maneuver of the Nazis to raise the birthrate, it was undeniably a diversion from the rigid restrictions previously forced on women. An

alternative viewpoint might suggest that a single woman who used the SS's *Lebensborn* program was trapped in a society which afforded her few opportunities. *Lebensborn* was to some extent progressive as it freed women from the stigma of unwedded childbirth and provided support that they desperately needed in place of a husband.

Nonetheless, every woman who stepped through the door and eventually delivered a healthy child there was supporting the regime. She was providing the Nazi leaders with what they desired most from women; genetically valuable children who would be the future foundation of the Third Reich. By using the *Lebensborn* house, she was also acknowledging this contribution to the Führer and in some ways promising the child's potential to the Nazis in a way she would not have if she had delivered the child in a hospital or with a midwife in her home. The fathers were not present at *Lebensborn*. Their absence is suggestive that these children were in a sense fathered by the regime.

Question of Culpability

Does following the laws of an immoral and all-powerful regime connote guilt? Does using a corrupt system for personal benefit put a woman on par with an SS officer? The horror of the Nazi regime beginning in 1933 often overshadows the mundane evil perpetrated by the common people. Frau Otting, a woman who lived under the shadow of the regime, concerning her own culpability, stated "there is no reason to have a feeling of guilt. There was no special event. I turned down no one who needed advice or help. I was never in such a situation, to give help." Yet she acknowledges that she is guilty. "In these dreadful years, I was, in human terms, happy in my personal life. While others fought, suffered, died, I was happy. Lived undisturbed... loved and was loved in return. They were the most beautiful years of my life."⁸⁰

Women in particular inhabited a strange limbo. Integral to the Third Reich's future, they faced immense pressure to become mothers of the Aryan race. Programs, such as the *Lebensborn* houses, and various acts of legislation imparted to them a measure of the malfeasance shared by followers of Hitler. Some may be inclined to give women a free pass, claiming they were simply pawns on the inescapable stage of history. Yet to do so would be a rejection of not only free will but the power these women possessed. Without the support and active participation of women in these programs, the Third Reich would never have been realized. Through acceptance of these diverse programs, all instituted for one aim, these women allowed the perversion of motherhood and morality; "we have found the power to hate from the love, the unconditional love we have for our people and its life, and from the love we have for our children. This hate will make us as hard and pitiless as the war requires us to be!"⁸¹ This credo came from the leading women's magazine of the time, illustrating the broad acceptance of this distortion of what ought to be pure and innocent; a mother's love for her family.

Should we hold women answerable for crimes they did not know were occurring? According to author Eugene Davidson, "even those most concerned, the Jews in concentration camps, and incredibly, many of those within sight of the gas chambers, refused to believe the stories they heard. The mass killings were beyond imagination; they sounded like clumsy propaganda."⁸² Ignorance of these misdeeds against humanity is no excuse; women may not have known what was happening at work camps, but they did know Hitler's purported plans for Jews and other undesirables. People understood that concentration camps were not desirable places; Holocaust survivor Primo Levi, in his introduction of Auschwitz Commandant Rudolf Hoess' autobiography, asserts "the

‘concept’ was anything but ‘unknown,’ it was already being cynically utilized in the regime’s propaganda: ‘if you don’t behave, you’ll end up in a concentration camp’ had become an almost proverbial turn of phrase.”⁸³ If one is willing to overlook reality in order to learn the art of cooking or receive a few more marks a month, she forfeits the excuse of ignorance and, consequently, loses her innocence. Perhaps not as responsible as members of the SS or even their husbands, women who made use of Nazi programs bear some liability for the crimes committed in the name of National Socialism.

CHAPTER 3

ENABLING THE REICH THROUGH FILM: LENI RIEFENSTAHL

"The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil."

-Hannah Arendt

Art is moral in that it awakens.

-Thomas Mann, *Magic Mountain*

"The devil's own director." "Mistress to Goebbels, Hitler, and Göring." These accusations and countless others were leveled at the infamous artist Leni Riefenstahl. Most people would consider their lives well lived if they had experienced a quarter of Riefenstahl's turbulent life. As a dancer, actress, film director, photographer or scuba diver, Riefenstahl lived under a spotlight that was both harsh and adoring. Yet for all her varied artistic accomplishments, Riefenstahl's name is indisputably tied with images of goose-stepping youths and ecstatic hordes at the Nuremberg rallies. She is widely acclaimed to be one of the foremost women film directors, most notably for her work "Triumph of the Will," a dubbed one of the most powerful pieces of propaganda. Never a Nazi party member, Riefenstahl's role in the Third Reich is a flagrant example of an enabler; she stepped into this role by supporting the regime with her films.

The following argument relies on the words of ancient Roman author Publius Syrus, who avowed that "he who helps the guilty, shares the crime."¹ Guilt can be determined more easily in cases where women participated in the regime's programs, such as *Lebensborn* homes. One can clearly ascertain complicity when these women were card carrying party members; by joining the Nazi party they visibly indicated their allegiance to the Nazi cause. In both these instances, women acted as contributors even if

they did not agree with Nazi policies or actions. Leni Riefenstahl does not fall into either of these categories. She is hailed as “the only woman to play a significant role in the rise of National Socialism.”² Adept in the medium of film and photography, she aided the aims of the Nazis using the powerful medium of film to reach millions across the world.

As many individuals who were involved in events surrounding Riefenstahl’s life pass away, the boundary between fiction and reality becomes blurred and it is difficult to determine her definite actions and contribution to the Third Reich. Many scholars and contemporaries, such as author Steven Bach maintain that Riefenstahl felt truth was malleable. Riefenstahl explicitly stated in an interview that “reality does not interest me.”³ It may be impossible to discover what in fact occurred in Riefenstahl’s tumultuous life. However, while one sifts through opposing accounts, a few facts remain uncontested. Riefenstahl worked for the Nazis to create a film that is still powerful today and in its prime served to convince people to turn to the Nazi cause while strengthening the convictions of millions of others. Her unique position as “Hitler’s filmmaker,” defines her as an enabler of this totalitarian regime.

The Early Life

“Dear God, give me a beautiful daughter who will become a famous actress.”⁴ This request was delivered up by Riefenstahl’s mother and it was an appeal that was answered in spades. Born in Berlin on August 22 of 1902, Leni Riefenstahl knew even as a small child that she was not for obscurity in her later professional and personal life. Supported by her mother and enjoying a turbulent relationship with her businessman father, Riefenstahl found her sex to be an obstruction to success as she lived in an era which limited the professional chances of women. Later she used this apparent weakness

to her advantage. She discovered her path after her first public dance performance at 21 years old and her infatuation with dance never wavered throughout her life.

Her autobiography, *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, leads one to believe that Riefenstahl enjoyed an exclusively successful career in expressive dance. There is no mention of any negative reviews in her writing, for example. By Riefenstahl's own account, she swept across the stages of Paris, London, Zurich and Berlin among others experiencing nothing but curtain calls and bouquets of roses. While she did receive glowing reviews, this was not wholly true. One reviewer stated she showed promise but "defeats... a higher artistry by remaining in the realm of the emotions; she lolls about, for example, at precisely the point at which she should be expressing pleasure in its most refined form."⁵ The article further asserted that, "her movements occasionally are unsuccessful for the same reason; her temperament threatens to lead her toward... the sensational." A German critic and contributor to newspaper *Berliner Tageblatt*, Fred Hildebrandt, was far more severe in his analysis, declaring that "this is the desire, the thirst and the longing of a silly and uninspired virgin."⁶

After less than a year of dancing on the stages of Europe, Riefenstahl suffered a knee injury. At first crushed as she saw her dreams destroyed, she saw a movie poster that would transform her life. Viewing "The Mountain of Destiny," directed by Dr. Fanck was a life-altering event for Riefenstahl. She later found the director to tell him that she was "going to be in [his] next picture."⁷ Her bold words proved not to be mere presumptuousness; their first meeting impressed the director Fanck as well. Three days later he presented his next film "The Holy Mountain" for "the dancer Leni Riefenstahl,"

who acted as both the inspiration and the star of the picture.⁸ This was the start of a long, fruitful career in film.

In 1932, Riefenstahl presented her directorial debut, “The Blue Light.” She directed the film out of necessity as she had no money for a director. The black and white film was a fairy tale featuring beautiful outcast Junta, starring Riefenstahl. She was both feared and desired by the townspeople, who believe her to be the “damned devil’s witch.”⁹ Eventually, Junta loses her life because of their greed. Riefenstahl saw herself as a modern Junta; both women faced harsh realities.¹⁰ This film would continue to hold a special importance for the young actress. Of its significance, Riefenstahl stated “this film was pivotal in my life, not so much because it was my first successful effort as a producer and director but because Hitler was so fascinated by this film that he insisted that I make a documentary about the Party rally in Nuremberg.”¹¹ “The Blue Light” was awarded the silver medal at the Venice Film Festival and ran for more than a year in Paris and London.

Yet Riefenstahl’s experience with this film is far more revealing than first glance may lead one to believe. “The Blue Light” was completed in collaboration with Hans Schneeberger and Jewish communist Béla Balázs. In 1938, Balázs’ name evaporated from the credits. In addition, Balázs never received payment for his work, an admission from Riefenstahl herself.¹² Furthermore, she asked notorious anti-Semite Julius Streicher to start a smear campaign on her coworker due to the “demands made upon me by the Jew Béla Balázs.”¹³ This letter to the editor of Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer* is currently on file at the Federal Archive in Berlin and in it she gives Streicher free rein to speak for her¹⁴ This revelation leads one to question Riefenstahl’s philosophy towards Judaism;

unleashing Streicher on an ex-coworker indicates either anti-Semitism or a ruthless use of her link with the regime.

After the war, Riefenstahl stated that anti-Semitism was personally an alien concept; in fact, she would assert many of her friends were Jewish. Notable among them was Harry Sokal, a wealthy Jew who Riefenstahl met while on vacation.¹⁵ According to Riefenstahl, Sokal was wholly devoted to her. He financed many of her projects, including “The Blue Light”.¹⁶ Although repudiated by Riefenstahl, Sokal asserted their relationship was not merely platonic.¹⁷ Sokal further maintained that after reading *Mein Kampf* and becoming connected to the Nazi command, Leni Riefenstahl adopted an anti-Semitic attitude.¹⁸ Whether this is truth or fabrication, Riefenstahl’s political and racial stances are more complex than her own words indicate.

Introduction to Hitler

Engrossed in her work, Leni Riefenstahl was not initially swept up in the tide of National Socialist furor. She attended her first Nazi rally in February of 1932. Though much of Hitler’s speech’s subject matter was unfamiliar to her, she experienced a shock when first observing the party’s leader, Adolf Hitler. Of the event she later wrote that during “that very same instant I had an almost apocalyptic vision that I was never able to forget. It seemed as if the earth’s surface were spreading out in front of me... I felt quite paralyzed. Although there was a great deal in his speech that I didn’t understand, I was still fascinated, and I sensed that the audience was in bondage to this man.”¹⁹ Riefenstahl also felt bound to Hitler and it was only much later in her life that she was able to free herself of the shackles. After the rally, she penned an animated letter to Hitler, praising his agenda and expressing interest in meeting him.

Party leader Adolf Hitler knew in turn of the young director and some of her works. Wilhelm Brückner, adjutant to the Führer, said Hitler had mentioned in a personal conversation that “the most beautiful thing [he had] ever seen in a film was Riefenstahl’s dance on the sea in ‘The Holy Mountain.’”²⁰ Brückner, by fate or chance, received the letter from Riefenstahl shortly after the conversation. The admiration each held for the other was apparent. They discussed Riefenstahl’s various films. “[Hitler] told me that he had seen all the films I had appeared in,” Riefenstahl wrote in her autobiography. Hitler continued, saying “‘The film that made the strongest impact on me was ‘The Blue Light’- above all, because it is unusual for a young woman to win out against the hostility and prejudices of that motion-picture industry.’”²¹ Hitler even purportedly proclaimed to Riefenstahl that “once we [the Nazis] come to power, you must make my films.”²² Riefenstahl expressed admiration of the Führer, but stated she declined the offer. Of the conversation, she recorded her reply as telling Hitler that “I will never make prescribed films. I don’t have the knack for it- I have to have a very personal relationship with my subject matter. Otherwise I can’t be creative... I have no interest whatsoever in politics. I could never be a member of your party.”²³

Relationship to Goebbels

Riefenstahl’s later professional connection to Hitler brought her in close contact with another power party member: Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels. Riefenstahl would assert that this relationship was strained at best. In her memoirs, she wrote of several instances when the minister pressed his affections on her; Riefenstahl’s spurning of his attentions turned him into a determined enemy. Accounts about the nature of their relationship differ. One of Riefenstahl’s cameramen said of the relationship between

Goebbels and the director that “they hated each other, that’s a fact. Goebbels tried to get rid of her very hard... Goebbels hated her guts.... He tried hard, Goebbels, to sabotage her work, everybody knew that.”²⁴ The Minister expressed irritation with Riefenstahl in his diary, as well. “I have had to knock some sense into Leni Riefenstahl,” he wrote. “Her behavior is unspeakable! A hysterical woman! Anyway, no man.”²⁵ Perhaps a combination of profession envy or personal dislike, the relationship between the Propaganda Minister and Riefenstahl was tenuous at best.

Regardless of their personal feelings towards one another, Goebbels respected Riefenstahl’s work and she was invited to many personal functions. Illustrating her closeness to the regime is her presence at the Goebbels’ home the day of the Reichstag elections, November 6th, 1932. After her invitation to the vital elections, Riefenstahl would plead ignorance, saying “why I was invited is a mystery to me.”²⁶

Anti-Semitism

Much like her mountain heroine Junta in “The Blue Light,” Riefenstahl stated she possessed a naiveté concerning politics in Germany and the outside world. She asserted she had never experienced racial discrimination towards Jews or other groups of people. Perhaps she was too concerned with her work to care about affairs of the state, or possibly her ignorance is an assumed act to explain away her past actions, but Riefenstahl claims that it was not until her twenties that she examined the ugly face of anti-Semitism. After her first Nazi rally, she discussed her opinions with Manfred George, a Jewish journalist. George later fled Germany, but like Riefenstahl believed that upstart Adolf Hitler was inspired and could save the country. Like many Germans reeling after Germany’s defeat in the First World War, Leni Riefenstahl believed that Hitler could

rescue Germany. His racial policies, though she many not have agreed with them, were secondary in relation to larger issues such as unemployment. In her autobiography,

Riefenstahl explained her stance:

I unreservedly rejected his racist ideas; and therefore I could never have joined the National Socialist Party. However, I welcomed his socialist plans. The deciding factor for me was the possibility that Hitler could reduce the tremendous unemployment that had already made over six million Germans unhappy and desperate. In any case, his racism, many people thought, was only a theory and nothing but campaign rhetoric.²⁷

Riefenstahl also reported that in her first conversation with Hitler she told him she could never be affiliated with the National Socialist party because “after all, you have racial prejudices. If I had been born an Indian or a Jew you wouldn’t even speak to me, so how can I work for someone who makes such distinctions among people.”²⁸

Yet when contrasted with her willingness to persecute colleague Balázs, it seems that Riefenstahl had little compunction exploiting these distinctions when it was to her advantage. After “The Blue Light” was somewhat frostily received in Germany, Riefenstahl reportedly blamed ignorant Jewish critics. In a conversation with Harry Sokal, she exclaimed in an outburst “thank God this won’t last much longer!”²⁹ Sokal added Riefenstahl viewed the Jewish critics as “foreigners” who had little understanding of not only her art but of the German essence.³⁰ This view would have been one supported by Nazi ideology; the belief that Jews were outsiders who did not understand what it meant to be a German.

Further evidence questioning her ostensible inexperience with racial prejudices is a hand written letter to Julius Streicher, the editor of *Der Stürmer*, a Nazi newspaper famous for its raging anti-Semitism. As stated above, Riefenstahl wrote to Streicher, insisting that he address “demands made upon me by the Jew Béla Balázs.”³¹ Regardless

of her racial prejudices, she fully employed her advantages as a privileged German woman with the so-called desirable Aryan racial characteristics against potential rivals. She knew which strings to pull in order to vanquish the threat Béla Balázs posed, indicating she was neither innocent nor naïve.

Political Ignorance

In her memoir, Riefenstahl recalled a particularly telling incident in Paris. Touring a movie studio, the workers suddenly raised their fists and broke into song. Riefenstahl was delighted, thinking the refrain was in her honor until someone discretely led her away. The song, she learned, was communist anthem *Internationale*. Riefenstahl waved the event away, stating that “almost half a century ago my political ignorance was forgivable.”³² Is her justification valid? After the First World War, as after most major international events, people experienced a shift from the importance of local affairs to increasing weight on global issues. The affairs of a country’s neighbors garnered more significance because of the larger repercussions. Riefenstahl held a significant position as the power of the camera could reach millions. Her ignorance is not a compelling excuse; as an international star and a film director she had a responsibility to understand what was going on in the world around her and the consequences of her actions. Not only did she hold an influential position as a filmmaker, she acted as a political messenger in mediums other than her films.

Riefenstahl, ostensibly politically uninformed, even acted as an intermediary between totalitarian dictators Hitler and Mussolini. In 1936, during a trip arranged by the Italian ambassador Bernardo Attolico, Riefenstahl journeyed to Rome. Mussolini, inspired by her famous propaganda film “Triumph of the Will,” offered her a similar film

project. He saw that “documentaries can be extremely effective” in transmitting a message.³³ Riefenstahl declined, occupied with the Berlin summer Olympics project and her massive film “Olympia,” which covered the events. The trip was not all in vain; Riefenstahl, purportedly above politics, acted as a diplomatic envoy. She gave Hitler a message from the Duce informing the Führer that Mussolini would not interfere with affairs between Austria and Germany.³⁴ A week later, on March 7 1936, Hitler took the Rhineland, and Riefenstahl later stated that she believes this communication may have been the spark for a more aggressive foreign policy which ultimately resulted in war.

Riefenstahl continually avowed that she was mesmerized by Hitler, not his politics or philosophy. She also stressed her ignorance as integral to her innocence; she had never joined the Party. However, not only did Riefenstahl read *Mein Kampf*, but she annotated her copy and later discussed it with Hitler. Of the book she wrote, “it was very interesting... I didn’t read all of it.” Riefenstahl continued stating, “some things [in it] really appealed to me. Obviously I didn’t like his racial theories.”³⁵ Her reading of the Nazi’s political ideology indicates she had at least some knowledge of Hitler’s agenda. Further indicating her relationship with Hitler and his plans is a telegram she sent Hitler following the German’s triumphal march into Paris in 1940. The telegram uses verbose language, asserting that Hitler’s “deeds exceed the power of human imagination. They are without equal in the history of mankind. How can we ever thank you?”³⁶ Later, she defended her outpouring, calling it excitement for the supposed end of the war.

Victory of the Faith

Riefenstahl’s relationship with the National Socialist regime bore its first artistic fruit with “Victory of the Will.” While “Triumph of the Will” is seen as Riefenstahl’s

masterwork, it was not the only film created for the party. Riefenstahl had several other works created for and financed by the Nazi party. Her earliest film created for the National Socialists was “Sieg des Glaubens,” or “Victory of the Faith,” created in 1933 for the Fifth Party Rally and the Congress of Victory, a gathering of National Socialists complete with speeches by leading Nazis. Though overshadowed by Riefenstahl’s other films, “Victory of the Faith” was in its zenith viewed by an estimated 20,000,000 Germans.³⁷ The film highlighted the 65,000 Hitler Youth and the 100,000 men from the SS, SA and *Stahlhelm* present, yet was dismissed by the director as “an imperfect fragment, not a motion picture.”³⁸

Hints of “Triumph of the Will” can be found in the film, however in 1933 the Nazis had not progressed into the perfect rows of goose-stepping SS officers and even the numerous swastikas were not uniform. A few scenes pictured disorganized mobs milling around. Early Nazi and the head of the SA Ernst Röhm marched alongside the Führer; in post-Night of the Long Knives “Triumph of the Will” he would be inexplicably absent, result of an assassination by Hitler. Overall, both Riefenstahl and the National Socialists had not fully developed into their later manifestations; in “Triumph of the Will,” both Riefenstahl and her subject matter reached an apogee one only saw whisperings of in “Victory of the Faith.” The difficulties of working on this project were such that Riefenstahl vowed never to make another Reich film. In opposition with her earlier statements, the director renamed her film company *Reichsparteitagfilm*, or Reich Party Rally Film in 1934.³⁹

Triumph des Willens

“Triumph of the Will” is hailed as one of the greatest propaganda films in existence, if not the most influential. The film, plodding through nearly two hours, opens as the Führer’s plane soars through the sky. Soon the plane descends, transitioning from the heavens to the gothic city of Nuremburg. Clouds soon turn to crowds, opening the Nuremberg rally of 1934. Featuring a star-studded cast, the film includes Goebbels, Hitler’s second in command Göring, deputy Rudolf Hess, and Himmler among others.

Transitioning to the nighttime activities of the Nazis, perfect military lines give way to torch and moonlight lit pagan rites. The morning scenes are equally powerful, displaying a city composed of hundreds of teepee tents. A more playful side of National Socialism is portrayed, when the virile young men break into a water fight while bathing. Riefenstahl glorifies the health and beauty of the youth, shirtless and laughing.

The film is also replete with religious undertones. Reminiscent of a pastor and his flock, Hitler’s speech to the workers of Germany comprises of men ritualistically chanting. The fervor of the followers is apparent even to modern eyes; it is present in the trembling voice, the obvious passion in the eyes. The workers, at their leader’s request, are exacted to “every hour, every day, think only of Germany.”⁴⁰

Spectators of the film, including critics from audience members, often note the juxtaposition in the film: Adolf Hitler, the individual, against the huge masses. This contrast makes the Führer stand prominent as the redeemer of thousands, a calm savior rescuing the screaming hordes. Riefenstahl’s style of filming aides this message, highlighting the hordes of marching SS officers are filmed not just panning from left to right or vice versa, but from both directions. This gives the impression that Germany is overrun with National Socialism, swept away by a relentless tide. Coupled with

Riefenstahl's use of wide aerial shots, Riefenstahl illustrates that National Socialism is Germany. The audience is left with the exclamation that "Hitler is the Party- Germany is Hitler and Hitler is Germany."⁴¹ The film was seen as encapsulating what Nazi Germany represented; even today it is the reason for "Triumph of the Wills" lasting importance and notoriousness.

Olympia

In 1936, Berlin was selected to host the summer Olympics. Storekeepers took down their "*judenfrei*"* signs from their shops as Germany prepared for the international event. Riefenstahl was commissioned by the Nazis to film the athletic event, giving her nearly unrestricted access to their coffers.⁴² This film elevated sport to art, and was so mammoth in length that it was broken into two separate sections. The opening sequence of the film parallels the modern Olympics with the ancient Greek traditions. Filmed by Willy Zielkl but visualized and directed by Riefenstahl, a nude athlete runs in slow motion to set the stage for the summer games. Another famous scene features divers appearing to fly birdlike through the sky.⁴³ This film took Riefenstahl eighteen months to edit, and when finished swept the world.⁴⁴ This film garnered the Reich Film Prize, first place at the Venice Biennale 1938, and was recognized globally for its artistry and skill at capturing the athletic events.

Hans Ertl, colleague of Riefenstahl's stated that during the filming of "Olympia", Riefenstahl spent more time acting the part of director than actually directing. "She was merely an observer in making the Olympia film. She only presented herself. The public took quick note of that and then they began yelling, 'Leni... Leni, show yourself!'" said Hans Ertl. Riefenstahl would appear, "gesticulating wildly, as if she were given some

* Translates into "Jew Free."

important direction. Had she stayed down on the stage, our work would have been much more productive than it was with her eternal running around.”⁴⁵ Critics of the film would assert that it glorified the cult of the body and fascism. American writer Susan Sontag, among others, saw the work as espousing central Nazi principles. Sontag compared this film with *Triumph of the Will* and saw it as the more visually opulent of the two works. The film, states Sontag, might have been renamed *Triumph of the Will* as “one straining, scantily clad figure after another seeks the ecstasy of victory, cheered on by ranks of compatriots in the stands, all under the still gaze of the benign Super-Spectator, Hitler, whose presence in the stadium consecrates this effort.”⁴⁶

Documentary or Propaganda?

Riefenstahl, until her death in 2003, stridently held that her most infamous film was not propaganda but documentary. In filming it, she was not attempting to influence, but merely to portray events as they occurred. However, the Nazi party financed her “documentaries,” including “Olympia”.⁴⁷ Throughout her life she attempted to explain her reasoning:

Since the film had neither a plot nor a script, I could only try to collate the images in such a way as to create visual rhythm and variety. I have so often been accused of having made propaganda films, but such charges are misguided. This film was a factual documentary, which is something very different. No one, not even the Party, gave me any sort of instructions on what to do. Nor were the shots posed for the camera... during my work I never thought of propaganda even for an instant.⁴⁸

Riefenstahl also pointed out that the film had no commentary, no narration to guide the audience to a prescribed conclusion. As the director intended, the images speak far more clearly than words. Riefenstahl’s argument that because the film lacked a firm plot and commentary it did not have a prescribed significance is a problematic claim. Pictures,

possessing neither of those two elements, can be very powerful when swaying public opinion. “Triumph of the Will” was all the more insidious because it lacked a commentator; viewers’ opinions were all the more entrenched because they felt their opinions were entirely their own or could bolster already held beliefs. Riefenstahl’s skillful manipulation of images portrayed a one sided view of the Nazis. Any great work of art, films included, must possess a message-- without a point, art cannot exist. In addition to its picturesque, visually pleasing images, Riefenstahl’s film was a one-sided depiction of National Socialism. She would also assert “Victory of the Faith” was not a party piece. One might argue that this work is more of a documentary than “Triumph of the Will.” It is less orchestrated; one can see a conductor directing the domineering marching tunes in one scene.

“Triumph of the Will” was impressive enough that Riefenstahl was honored by various countries for her work. Benito Mussolini understood the power film had for reaching the masses; he approached Riefenstahl with the hopes she would make a film for his fascist government.⁴⁹ World leaders across the globe understood the force of film. In the United States, director Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* series were viewed by millions. Capra employed a narrator, and told his viewers if they ever came across Mussolini or Hitler, “they shouldn’t hesitate” to kill them.⁵⁰ “Private Snafu,” produced by Warner Bros in 1943 and worked on by notables such as Dr. Seuss, was a far more brazen example of propaganda. In this official cartoon of the United States War Department, Germans are portrayed with fangs and a satanic vampire Adolf Hitler hisses at a bumbling Private Snafu.⁵¹

Propaganda was an instrument of war; no less deadly than a rifle for its insidious turning of public opinion. Riefenstahl did not employ ridiculous cartoons such as those used in “Private Snafu” or an all-knowing narrator. “Triumph of the Will” is doubly effective because the view that is presented is seemingly incontestable; what the viewer doesn’t see is the sinister side of National Socialism, the passing of the Nuremberg laws, and the persecution of minorities and undesirables.

Today the film is seen as the definition of Nazism. “There is not a documentary about National Socialism that can get by without using images from this film,” asserts writer and historian Jürgen Trimborn.⁵² Triumph holds lasting relevance as the definition of National Socialism, says Trimborn and “no other film has defined as deeply our visual notion as to what National Socialism actually was.”⁵³ “Triumph of the Will” seduces while affirming the dominance of the National Socialist movement. “Victory of the Faith” and “Triumph of the Will” both shine a spotlight on National Socialism.

Can “Olympia” be considered a piece of propaganda for Hitler as well? Many, such as Britain, boycotted the showing of this film after the outbreak of war. This was in response to the director’s ties to the regime and not a result of the content of “Olympia.” An exhibit titled “the Film in Germany,” held at the Film Department of the Museum of Modern Art in New York stressed that “in all versions no special emphasis was placed on the success of the host-country athletes to the diminishment of others.”⁵⁴ Yet others felt differently. Susan Sontag attacked Riefenstahl, asserting that all her work was infected with an obsession of the body. Sontag declaring that “all four of Riefenstahl’s commissioned Nazi films—whether about Party congresses, the Wehrmacht, or

athletes—celebrate the rebirth of the body and of community, mediated through the worship of an irresistible leader.”⁵⁵

Postwar Years

Life after the close of the Second World War was not without its difficulties for the now married Riefenstahl. While the filmmaker saw the end coming, she could not have predicted the chaotic road she would travel. She was arrested for her ties to the Nazis an upwards of ten times, first by the occupying Americans and then by the vengeful French. It was while under arrest that she learned of Hitler’s death by suicide on April 30, 1945; she wept all night after receiving the news.⁵⁶ Riefenstahl managed to escape the first three times she was detained, but her fifth arrest took her to a detention center nicknamed the “Bear Cellar,” which housed the leadership of the Nazi party. Among Göring, Hitler’s adjutant Brückner who set up the first meeting between the Führer and Riefenstahl, and over one thousand men, Riefenstahl was one of only four women interned in the camp.⁵⁷

Riefenstahl’s naiveté, real or assumed, expired at the Bear Cellar; it met its end when faced with the atrocities committed in the concentration camps. No longer enchanted by Adolf Hitler, she viewed the photographs the Americans showed to her with mounting disgust and horror. Yet remnants of her past attraction to Hitler remained, and she experienced much difficulty matching the Adolf she knew with the monster the world discovered. A conversation with fellow internee Johanna Wolf, Hitler’s senior secretary and long time Nazi, reveals this inner confliction.

I asked Fräulein Wolf: ‘How do you explain these extreme contrasts? On the one hand Hitler is so worried about the fate of his people; on the other hand he is inhumane and tolerates the crimes we have learned here, or even orders them?’ Fräulein Wolf sobbed, “he can’t have been informed about those crimes. He was surrounded by

fanatics; people like Himmler, Goebbels and Bormann exerted more and more influence on him. They issued orders which Hitler knew nothing about...’ it seemed incomprehensible to me to connect Hitler, as I knew him, with those crimes. As doubts began stirring in me more and more, however, I wanted to know the truth, no matter how much it hurt. I simply couldn’t imagine that orders of such a vast scope could be carried out without Hitler’s knowledge. Yet how were these cruelties to be reconciled...I was totally confused.⁵⁸

Eventually the truth would become overwhelming as the lies were revealed. This was a burden which Riefenstahl was to carry for the rest of her life.

Lies or Omissions?

A person who has lived a life as full as Riefenstahl’s is bound to forget or overlook some details. It might even be expected that an individual participating in Hitler’s regime might manipulate the truth to escape punishment legally or socially after the war. Yet there is evidence that Riefenstahl may have lied about certain events. Steven Bach, in a reading and discussion of his work *Leni: the Life and Work of Leni Riefenstahl* stated that in her old age Riefenstahl bought into her own myth and began to believe her falsehood was fact. Bach provides the example of the German film *Ways to Strength and Beauty*, produced by German motion picture company Universum Film-Aktien Gesellschaft, better known as UFA which featured a young, bare-breasted Riefenstahl. This film reached world-wide popularity, yet Riefenstahl “denied being in this film, denied every having seen it or ever having heard of it.”⁵⁹ Why this denial for such an admired film? Bach ventures the suggestion that Riefenstahl wished to present the illusion that she had achieved “instant stardom.”⁶⁰

Questions continue to surface even after Riefenstahl’s death. There are persistent charges that after an appointment to Poland to act as a war correspondent Riefenstahl witnessed a slaughter of the Jews of Kónski. Photos of the director show her open-

mouthed, sobbing and disgusted. She would continually assert that she had not been witness to a slaughter, but soldiers kicking civilians.⁶¹ The truth may be impossible to discover, “But there can be no doubt today that she witnessed a great deal more in Kónski than she later admitted.”⁶²

Another enduring accusation leveled at Riefenstahl pertains to her film “Tiefland,” filmed under the Nazis yet not released until 1954. The Nazis helped in funding the project, and “Tiefland” was almost completely funded by the Third Reich and to a large extent from Hitler’s personal coffers. Riefenstahl spent the enormous sum of seven million Reichsmark at a time when feature films cost, on average, half a million.”⁶³ Extras in the film were unpaid laborers of a nearby work camp, Maxglan-Leopoldskron.⁶⁴ Riefenstahl would maintain that these extras, the Roma “said then that working with us had been the loveliest time of their lives, though no one compelled them to make this statement.”⁶⁵ After the war, she made statements that she had seen many of the Roma after the war. Antonia Reinhardt, who allegedly was murdered at Auschwitz, wrote in support of Riefenstahl.⁶⁶ Yet she was taken to court on charges that most of her extras had been slaughtered in Auschwitz. In 1980 two charges were leveled at Riefenstahl.

First, several witnesses agreed the Riefenstahl was personally at the camp and chose the extras herself. The second assertion was made by Josef Reinhardt, who stated that as a thirteen-year-old he had explained to Leni Riefenstahl, as instructed by his father, that the Gypsies of Auschwitz were going to be killed. She had promised to support and protect his family—a promise she had not kept.⁶⁷

The court maintained that the film, shot in 1940-41, did not take place during the persecution of the Roma.⁶⁸ The truth about the “Tiefland” Roma may never be discovered, however many of the extras perished in the concentration camp. One of the family members of extras, Zaezilia Reinhardt “was shocked by the disrespect Riefenstahl

exhibited toward the memory of her many family members who had been murdered...

Riefenstahl declared on August 14, 2002, that she would never again assert that she had seen all of the Roma extras again after 1945.”⁶⁹

The once prominent filmmaker for the Nazis faced a barrage of attacks, some merited and other flagrant lies. Her co-star Luis Trenker forged a diary purporting to have been written by Hitler’s mistress Eva Braun. The introduction of this undoubtedly forged book states that “there can be no doubt that Eva’s Diary is genuine.”⁷⁰ Readers were told that Riefenstahl performed nude dances in private and at the Berghof.⁷¹ However, the diary is exposed as a counterfeit when compared with selections of niece to Empress Elizabeth of Austria Countess Marie Larisch’s diary as entries mirror one another.⁷² The damage done to Riefenstahl’s reputation by these rumors cannot be underestimated. Already tied to the regime, many people found it easy to believe Riefenstahl exotically danced and was Hitler’s lover.

Riefenstahl’s Responsibility

Leni Riefenstahl existed in a world where her success was somewhat of a contradiction. She was admired by Adolf Hitler who saw little worth in women, who relegated females to a domestic sphere that was alien to Riefenstahl. She moved swiftly through the circles of men, but it was her blind ambition that was her downfall. Leni Riefenstahl’s need for achievement and her perfectionism led her to become an effective participant and tool of the Third Reich. Riefenstahl was not forced to make films for the National Socialists. Many artists, including Marlene Dietrich, fled Nazi Germany to the open arms of Hollywood.

Decades later, Riefenstahl asks, “what was my responsibility?”⁷³ Riefenstahl excuses her support of the party, stating that a great many people were in favor of Hitler. She bristles, “should I have been a resistance fighter?”⁷⁴ Her query is based on the supposition that the only form of opposition is active; yet there are many forms of defiance. In order to oppose a morally unjust regime, she did not need to physically take up arms. Her arsenal possessed the power of film, a weapon far mightier and more far-reaching than a gun. She excuses the films she made for the National Socialists with a breezy “to me the film [Triumph of the Will] wasn’t about politics,” it was merely a job.⁷⁵ Furthermore, “I’d have made the same film in Moscow if the need arose... I shot the subject matter as well as I could and shaped it into a film... no matter if the subject was politics or vegetables or fruit.”⁷⁶

Riefenstahl never acknowledged the power of her work nor made an admission of guilt. In fact, she viewed herself as a victim of circumstance; an object of pity, not loathing. After the war, she stated she did not see her work in a different light. However, “I did look at it differently to the extent that I put myself into the minds of the victims. How awful for them to see those swastikas, the SS men... people we’d never thought of as criminals. It was a breakdown that’s actually been permanent. I’ve never recovered from the horror.”⁷⁷ Leni Riefestahl seemingly believed that her situation was similar to the victims of the holocaust and others persecuted.

The truth about details of Leni Riefenstahl’s life may never be settled. Her relationship to the Führer, her feelings concerning National Socialism or anti-Semitism may forever remain a mystery. But there are certainties which can help the modern person evaluate her life. Leni Riefenstahl created films in support of the Nazis including

“Triumph of the Will”. Another film, “*Olympia*”, helped hoodwink the world into viewing Germany as less of a threat. She helped a criminal regime. It does not matter if she personally never joined the Nazis or agreed with their dogma; her actions define her. Women’s leader Gertrud Scholtz-Klink stated that women need only wield a wooden spoon, which if used correctly could be as powerful as any other type of weapon; Leni Riefenstahl brandished the power of film. Her excuses—that she was fulfilling a job, that she never became a Nazi party member—pale when compared to the weight of her work.

CONCLUSION

To accept that these women, whether they accepted *kindergeld* from the regime or created propaganda films, hold a degree of culpability naturally leads one to the next question; what degree of fault. Guilt does not lie in precise black or white, but varying shades of gray. One can assert that a man who slit another's throat is guiltier than the person who knowingly opened the door for the murderer. How culpable are these women?

The first chapter of this paper briefly examines the Weimar years and the setup for Nazi dictatorship. It further inspects Nazi ideology as pertaining to women, Adolf Hitler's public and private views, and the opinions of key Nazis such as Heinrich Himmler. The virtually unknown *Reichsfrauenführerin*, or women's leader Gertrud Scholt-Klink is also studied. This chapter provides a background, a launching point to consider more deeply women's roles in the context of ideology.

The next chapter establishes the need for increased population. In this environment, women were seen as "warriors" for the Führer; producers of little soldiers for the Third Reich. However the stigmas against the needed large families were deeply ingrained. The regime employed propaganda depicting happy and healthy large families. They also illegalized abortions, slapping large penalties on the disobedient. A program of marriage loans was also instituted, paid off by child born. Other programs included the Mother Cross, one of Himmler's brain children. Less beneficial for women was the Divorce Law and paragraph fifty-five which in effect allowed men to abandon their wives. Established less to inspire large families and more to allow women the tools needed to care for these broods were home economics classes and recuperation homes.

Finally, this chapter looks at *Lebensborn* homes, a more controversial tenet of National Socialism.

The third and final chapter hones in on a single individual, Leni Riefenstahl. Beginning with her early life, this chapter traces her relationship with the regime. It explores her anti-Semitism and purported lack of political knowledge. Riefenstahl's first meeting with Hitler and her relationship to Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels is also significant. This chapter examines specifically each of the director's works with emphasis on *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia*. Leni Riefenstahl lived an undeniably tumultuous life and there is also evidence that she may have perpetuated lies or omissions. This chapter did not look to solve the mysteries of her life. Instead, guilt was determined solely from what is known for certain.

Yet none of these sections considered to what degree of guilt that the modern person should hold these women accountable. Take into account the women discussed in the second chapter; ordinary women who attended marriage classes or lived in a *Lebensborn* home. Is a woman who utilized marriage loans yet did not have children exclusively to satisfy the regime guilty? Yes, as previously stated, this woman must be held somewhat responsible for supporting the regime. But to what extent must she be considered accountable? Certainly not to the same level as a female or even male guard; there is no actual blood on her hands. This common woman instead acts as an enabler, providing an environment for National Socialism to grow and thrive. Her support facilitated Hitler and his regime.

Leni Riefenstahl was in no way ordinary; she is unlike those average women in every way except that like them, she was an enabler. Is her guilt any more or less than the

ordinary woman, given that her support was far more powerful in the medium of film? This author would assert that Riefenstahl was some degrees guiltier than ordinary wives and mothers. Still not as culpable as an *SS* officer her contribution to the National Socialists cannot be overlooked. Riefenstahl went to her deathbed without ever acknowledging her role or any remorse for her actions.

American inventor Richard Buckminster Fuller stated that “those who play with the devil's toys will be brought by degrees to wield his sword.” Such was the case with regular women who participated in Adolf Hitler’s programs and director Leni Riefenstahl. Wooed by the various programs and opportunities offered to them they benefited without asking questions. While not as guilty as guards of concentration camps or *SS* officers, these women are culpable. Even tools employed for evil purposes bear responsibility for their actions; they acted as the foundation of the Third Reich. These women confused evil for happiness and in doing so supported the Third Reich.

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