Empowerment or Endurance? War Wives’ Experiences of Independence During and After the Second World War in Germany, 1939–1948

Hester Vaizey

‘Despite men’s admiration for their working wives, husbands don’t want to come home to a secretary, a teacher, a politician, a governess or a shopkeeper—they want to come home to nothing other than their wives.’¹ This was the advice given to women in Das Blatt der Hausfrau magazine in July 1949. As men were conscripted into the armed forces, more and more wives had been left to manage their families alone. At the same time more women than ever entered paid employment to fill the gaps in the market left by their soldier husbands. After the war, magazine articles such as this one encouraged women to stick to traditional conceptions of gender roles, with women being above all wives and mothers. This, they suggested, would be best for marital harmony upon reunion. But had women’s wartime experiences changed their views on being consigned to the home?²

Ultimately, this article will argue, women wanted to return to a sense of normality at the end of the war. In the aftermath of defeat, when mere survival was paramount—rather than speculation about potentially improved models of the family set-up—‘normality’ was most obviously represented by prewar gender roles. Women were hoping for normalization, not only in the public sphere in the sense of a flourishing economy, but also in the private sphere with the return of the men and a resumption of the old role divisions. The increase in tasks that wives had to undertake as a result of the absence of their husbands and the crisis situation could in no way be described as liberating, but was rather experienced as burdensome, and meant that a woman ‘standing alone’ (alleinstehend) had to cope with all the work, all the responsibility and all the worries about the future on her own. Most wives thought their situation would be made easier not by a change in gender roles, but rather by the reinstatement of old ones.³

Scholars working in the field have argued that war, by removing husbands for years at a time, strengthened the position of women, reinforced their self-reliance and created a

¹ Das Blatt der Hausfrau (July 1949).
new and independent female type. At the same time, war, it has been claimed, profoundly undermined the structures sustaining German masculinity. Men were not only in many cases physically broken by war and long periods of imprisonment in the Soviet Union, but also psychologically weakened and poorly equipped to return to the routines of peacetime or to cope with the complex demands of a ruined home front in which just surviving called for considerable ingenuity. Under these circumstances, many historians have suggested, this period was the ‘hour of the woman’, and thus a crucial moment in the emancipation of women from the structures of patriarchal control. This article revisits the hour of the woman, and questions whether female activity in and after the war really affected how women viewed established gender roles.

When the Nazis came to power in January 1933, their pledge to restore and protect traditional family values met with widespread approval from those who saw ‘the new woman’ in Weimar, with her short skirt-wearing and cigarette-toting behaviour, as a sign of moral degeneration. In the wake of the First World War, more women, it seemed, were stepping outside the confines of domesticity and, in so doing, challenging patriarchal authority. The Nazi Party envisaged a restricted role for women, and in particular for wives, who, they felt, should focus their energies on marriage and motherhood. Much has been made of ‘the 3 Ks’—children, church, kitchen (Kinder, Kirche, Küche)—which allegedly encapsulated the Nazis’ ideal role for women (though actually they were hardly big supporters of religion), but while Nazi policy for reproduction was radical in its racist, eugenic agenda, the notion that women should give up work upon marriage to look after home and family was common to many countries across Europe at the time.

As with many other Nazi policies, their rhetoric about female employment bore little resemblance to the reality. Despite their tirade against ‘double earners’—married couples where both husband and wife worked—who, they claimed, were robbing unemployed men of work, working-class wives who were often forced into employment out of financial necessity continued to work in the Third Reich. Though the Nazis’ policies in this sphere were not successful, as the rising number of female employees in the 1930s indicates, they hardly encouraged the development of gender roles towards a more equal footing.
The war, by contrast, gave married women greater opportunity to be involved outside the private sphere. For despite Hitler’s reluctance to draft women into war work, facilitated by the use of forced foreign labourers in their place, women, particularly from working-class backgrounds, were drawn into key areas of the war economy that were traditionally male preserves. On the face of it, then, this was a rare opportunity for married women to be ‘emancipated’ and to participate in society in the same way as men. In reality, when female conscription was introduced on 27 January 1943, it affected women in different classes quite unevenly. Middle- and upper-class wives seemed to find ways to evade back-breaking war work in factories, leaving drafted working-class wives to complain bitterly. In any case, though there was an overall rise in the number of women in the workforce, female war work was overwhelmingly undertaken by young, single women. In the aftermath of war independent women were highly visible—clearing rubble from Germany’s streets, working in the black market or in more formal employment—a fact that was only emphasized by the absence of men, who were either in prisoner-of-war camps, missing or dead. This contributed to fears that traditional gender roles had been permanently undermined by the war.

Politicians in West Germany worried that traditional gender roles had been seriously undermined by the independence and employment opportunities afforded to women while their husbands were away. Franz-Josef Würmeling, Family Minister for the Christian Democratic Union, referred to a state of crisis in the family at this time, fearing the end to ‘traditional’ families in the long term. After the First World War, politicians regarded families as critical to the re-establishment of a functioning society, and this happened again in West Germany. The West German Family Ministry was founded in 1953 in the light of the perceived threat to family values, and it sought to take vigorous counter-action to promote and reinstate sex-specific roles within the traditional family model. Such action was required because in their plans for rebuilding Germany, the family, and in particular women in their role as housewives and mothers, were to be the rock on which postwar stability would rest.

Under the slogan ‘no experiments’, Konrad Adenauer was elected as West Germany’s first chancellor in 1949. This mantra extended to family policy as well. The Basic Law of 1949, for example, acknowledged women’s equality with men, but simultaneously declared that women needed protecting and that women could best serve German

11 Heineman, What Difference Does a Husband Make?, p. 64.
reconstruction in their roles within the home.\textsuperscript{14} To this end, the Family Ministry introduced child benefits to enable mothers to be ‘freed’ from the necessity of work.

In West Germany, fears about the state of the family were provoked in part because the experience of war had deprived many families of a male breadwinner and authority figure for years. That women had proved themselves capable of taking on this role further threatened the resumption of the traditional family model. These fears were also a reaction to the Communist government in the East, which expected women to work. In the eyes of the Communists, a female’s activity in the private sphere prevented her from fulfilling her potential in the workforce. In the propaganda wars between East and West Germany, West German politicians seized on such rhetoric and used the potential threat of Communism to the family unit as a political tool.\textsuperscript{15} Whether or not fears for the long-term future of the family were valid, in West Germany, conservative politicians clearly felt that traditional gender roles were under attack and that in the face of the perceived ‘strong woman’ an energetic and defensive campaign to promote traditional ‘norms’ was required.\textsuperscript{16} In their view, reimposing the traditional nuclear family model ‘from above’ was crucial to societal stability in the young democracy.

All of this evidence suggests that the war had changed women’s position significantly. Reading this evidence, Nori Möding concluded that ‘for a moment, it looked as if women had become the stronger sex’.\textsuperscript{17} And in the light of increased female activity in the public sphere, Elizabeth Heineman reasons that ‘Germans became increasingly accustomed to the notion that women could perform strenuous, independent, and socially valuable work without men’.\textsuperscript{18} Ute Frevert further argues that women, having grown used to their expanded roles, ‘had no wish to place themselves once more under orders, when for years they had managed on their own’.\textsuperscript{19}

Without a doubt women of all classes did survive and endure extremely challenging circumstances, putting the food on the table for their families, clearing the rubble from the streets and performing numerous important tasks as German society collapsed after the defeat. It is therefore quite understandable that the work of feminists such as Eva Schulze and Sibylle Meyer ‘shines the spotlight’ on women’s achievements in this period.\textsuperscript{20} What follows, however, demonstrates that the image of the strong woman dominating the public sphere is not the whole story.


\textsuperscript{18} Heineman, \textit{What Difference Does a Husband Make?}, p. 21.


\textsuperscript{20} Meyer and Schulze, \textit{Wie wir das alles geschafft haben}, p. 1.
Empowerment or Endurance?

The first section reappraises the statistical evidence on which the strong woman of the postwar era is based, and contends two points: first, that women’s experience of war work had little impact in changing their long-term employment prospects, and second, that in spite of the social dislocation caused by the war, women continued to desire a return to prewar gender roles. The second section builds on the work of Robert Moeller’s Protecting Motherhood, which is focused on the West German political agenda in recasting gender roles, and on Merith Niehuss’s Familie, Frau und Gesellschaft, which examines changes in women’s roles through statistical data. It studies women’s voices to focus on what women themselves thought and felt about these changes. Wartime letters show that the restoration of the ‘traditional’ family, with the women confined to the home as wives and mothers, was as much the result of popular aspirations as it was of governmental efforts to reimpose this family model from above.

Poststructuralists have cast doubt on what ego-documents such as letters and diaries can tell us about people’s thoughts and feelings in the past, by questioning the authority of the subject as a ‘free, autonomous author of the text’. However, as this article will show, people still have genuine feeling even if these feelings are socially constructed. As historians we will of course never be able to recapture events as they were directly encountered (Erlebnis). At best, we will learn how people made sense of such experiences upon reflection (Erfahrung). There is no need for the historian to despair, however, for particularly in immediate sources such as diaries and letters, emotion may be directly expressed through language. Even though written sources might be composed texts, the tone and phraseology of which may be formulaic, repeated commonplaces and banal clichés may also convey very real emotions. We can learn not just what people felt they ought to feel, but also how they thought, or remembered, they felt. The act of writing expressed emotions that surely bore some relationship with the ones it recalled. Diaries, for example, did not present sadness as joy, or longing as indifference. Probing individual subjectivity thus remains an achievable and desirable goal.

Between thirty and forty million letters were exchanged between the home front and the Front during the Second World War. Apart from the very occasional spell of leave...

from the Front, letters were the only way of keeping in touch. They were thus an important space that people used to express their emotional response to wartime events. Until recently, historians have been sceptical about what we can learn from wartime correspondence, by making much of the fact that letters could be censored and also be used to reassure loved ones rather than reflecting reality. But censorship could not be all-pervasive since so many letters were sent daily. The hopeless military situation and the catastrophic living conditions were aspects of the wartime reality that were frequently mentioned in letters, which openly talked of the exhaustion and low morale. While some letters to and from the front sometimes reflected a picture of what the author wanted the recipient to see, even if this was far from the reality, not all authors gave their letters a rose-tinted spin. Many writers poured out their feelings onto the page as an emotional compensation for the toughness of war. And it is through such writings that we can learn how married women coped with the independence that the war had thrust upon them.

When examining women’s letters and diaries from during and after the war however, we should, of course, be careful not to lump women’s experiences together into one homogenous category. While working-class wives had worked prior to the war, employment outside the home was a new experience for most middle and upper-class wives. This would, of course, have a bearing on how women responded to their situation in wartime. ‘German women in one class’, Jill Stephenson rightly points out, ‘did not necessarily—and perhaps did not often—feel solidarity with German women in another class, and did not necessarily feel solidarity with women in their own class’. In spite of this however, married women across all classes had certain experiences in common, such as managing on their own when their husbands went to war; caring for their families on their own as the places where they lived were bombed, and then waiting at the end of the war for the return of their husbands with the hope of resuming some sort of normality in peacetime. Reactions of women to their circumstances often crossed class divides. Regardless of how much money or how many important contacts women had, some of the difficulties they faced at this time could not be avoided. As former signs of social class,
such as houses and other possessions, were destroyed, and as people from all sectors of society lost close friends and relatives in the war, class no longer defined an individual’s experience as much as it had done before the war.\(^{30}\)

In the immediate aftermath of war, women could be seen clearing rubble from Germany’s bomb-ravaged streets. The work undertaken by these so-called ‘women of the rubble’ (\textit{Trümmerfrauen}) contributed both to the initial rebuilding of German society after the war and also to the sense that the strong woman of the postwar years had forced traditional gender roles out of kilter. Highly politicized images of \textit{Trümmerfrauen}, however, implied a far greater participation by women in the workforce than was actually the case. \textit{Trümmerfrauen} only constituted 5\% to 10\% of employed women in Berlin postwar. And overall, despite the surplus of women (\textit{Frauenüberschuss}) and a shortage of men (\textit{Männermangel}), where women outnumbered men by seven to one, men still convincingly dominated the workplace after the war. For every one woman working in West Germany, for example, there were two men working in 1946. And only one in three women worked.\(^{31}\)

The most common scenario for married couples after the war was in line with the traditional gender-differentiated public/private sphere, since the majority of women in the workplace were single women without children.\(^{32}\) Of course many women, notably those from humble backgrounds, had worked prior to the war to ease financial needs. In 1933, for example, 29.1\% of married women were employed.\(^{33}\) But only a fifth of married women were employed in Munich in 1946, which hardly constituted a massive threat to the husband’s role as main breadwinner, especially since it was not a big change from the number of married women who had worked prior to the war.\(^{34}\)

Overall the number of women in the German workforce increased from 3.4 million in 1938 to 4.5 million in 1951.\(^{35}\) What the numbers do not show, however, is that this merely


\(^{32}\) Niehuss, \textit{Familie, Frau und Gesellschaft}, pp. 34, 38.

\(^{33}\) DZI 5041, \textit{Sozialtaschenbuch} 1952, p. 60. (The term ‘employed’ in this context is translated from the German word \textit{berufstätig}).


\(^{35}\) Statistisches Jahrbuch für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1952 (Wiesbaden, 1955), p. 86; Deutschland Taschenbuch. \textit{Tatsachen und Zahlen} (Frankfurt, 1954), p. 138. Numbers for employees and workers for 1938 are according to workbook estimates of the civil service office in charge of paying employees in 1939; figures for 1948 and 1951 include employees and workers. It is unclear whether or not casual and part-time employment was included in these statistics. The difficulty with such statistics is confusion between the German terms \textit{erwerbstätig}, which means economically active, and \textit{berufstätig}, which means employed. \textit{Erwerbstätig} women could be those who ran their own shop or small business, usually as part of a family business.
constituted a stronger representation of women in traditionally female spheres of employment. More women entered the workplace as a result of the war, and some had been drafted into key ‘male’ industries where foreign forced labourers were in short supply, but after the war these new entrants to the labour market were most commonly engaged in jobs which had predominantly been carried out by women before the war, such as secretarial work, nursing, and work in the textile industry. Furthermore, in the wake of war, many women who were responsible for feeding their families found it easier to make ends meet by foraging for food than by working for wages. And as men returned, women working in more traditionally male spheres were squeezed out to make jobs for veterans. Thus the war did not prompt a big change surrounding the type of work that women did.\(^{36}\)

Contemporary fears, voiced in political debates and in newspapers, that traditional gender roles, and, more specifically, the institution of marriage, were under threat from women’s allegedly new competence, were ill-founded. The proportion of women marrying in West Germany after the war was very similar to the number in the decades preceding the war, with 9.4 marriages per 1000 adults in 1938 in comparison to 10.6 per 1000 in 1948.\(^{37}\) Though 2.4% fewer women were recorded as being of married status in 1946 as compared to 1939, this can be explained by several factors: first, economic hardship in the wake of the war encouraged couples to delay marriage; and second, an increased number of women were widowed as a result of the war. Overall these figures challenge the argument that women were increasingly choosing to be without men, as several articles in women’s magazines suggested. One piece, for instance, from Das Blatt der Hausfrau in January 1949, entitled Frauenüberschuss—anders gesehen (the surplus of women seen from a new perspective), argued that women were increasingly opting to remain single. The article concluded that ‘women have become very, very different. It is no longer about waiting for a husband and a life confined to the family.’\(^{38}\)

The number of marriages did not increase as dramatically after the Second World War as after the First. But this was not necessarily because newly independent women were rejecting marriage and opting for the single life. More probably, this was because soldiers returned home more frequently during the Second World War, especially in the early war years, which allowed them the opportunity to marry during the war, in contrast to the First World War, where most couples had to wait until after the war to marry. Moreover, despite the relative scarcity of men in Germany immediately after the war—a consequence of the fact that many men had died and many of those who had survived did not return home immediately after the defeat—the marriage rate still did not decrease. The officially ‘single’ category of females also included women in so-called ‘uncle marriages’ (Onkel-Ehen). These were war widows who lived with a new partner but remained unmarried in order to retain the war pension from their dead husband. Such women were not choosing to be without men, but their unofficial partnerships may well have contributed to fears that the institution of marriage was under threat, since they were not adhering to ‘traditional’ norms where relationships were concerned. Furthermore, since the marriage rate in the decade after the Second World War was on

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36 Ruhl, Verordnete Unterordnung, p. 50; Niehuss, Familie, Frau und Gesellschaft, p. 81.
37 Statistisches Jahrbuch für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1955 (Wiesbaden, 1955), p. 54.
38 Das Blatt der Hausfrau (Jan. 1949).
average slightly higher than the average rate in the decade before the war, hovering at around ten marriages per 1000 German inhabitants, this further brings into question the notion that women increasingly chose to live alone after the war.

High divorce rates after the war further contributed to the notion that the dislocation of traditional gender roles during the war posed a threat to the institution of marriage in the long term.\(^{39}\) The assumption was that men were not prepared to give up the last vestiges of masculinity to fit in with the new status quo they found at home, and that women, having ruled the roost alone, were no longer willing to defer to their husband.\(^{40}\)

There is no doubt that instances of divorce did increase during this period. The divorce rate reached a high that was double the prewar rate in 1948 at 88,374 divorces, with twenty-four divorces per day in Hamburg, in comparison to thirteen in 1938. Set in the context of the number of divorces per existing marriages though, while there were 3.8 divorces for every 1000 marriages in 1939, this figure only rose to 5.2 divorces per 1000 marriages by 1946. This hardly suggests that couples were suddenly abandoning their marriages without hesitation. Most Germans shared traditional values, which were powerfully re-enforced by the Christian churches.\(^{41}\) Old ideas about family values were firmly entrenched and not cast aside lightly.

The increased number of divorces in the immediate aftermath of war is also misleading in a number of ways. The high divorce rates before 1950 were largely symptomatic of the divorces which had not taken place due to the war: from 1943 the activity of the divorce courts was increasingly scaled down, and they only resumed normal service in 1946. The outstanding divorces from this period explain the particularly high divorce figures between 1946 and 1948. This suggests that there was less of a boom in divorce rates than the raw data would lead us to believe.\(^{42}\) Furthermore, in comparing the divorce rates with those of the First World War, it is important to remember that there were more opportunities to get married: in the Second World War, men came home on leave more frequently, and couples could enter a long-distance marriage (Ferntrauung), which allowed them to get married without being in the same place. The divorce rate after the Second World War was correspondingly higher.\(^{43}\)

Which sex filed for divorce more commonly reveals much about the power balance between the sexes after the war. Between 1945 and 1955, half of the applications for divorce came from men. Before the war, by contrast, two thirds of the applicants for divorce were women. These figures, also mirrored in East Germany, suggest that women who had coped and could cope without men did not necessarily want to do so. Indeed

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\(^{40}\) Schubert and Kuhn, *Frauen in der deutschen Nachkriegszeit*, vol. 1, p. 56. See also Sie, *Krieg im Frieden*, p. 8; Meyer and Schulze, ‘Krieg im Frieden’, pp. 188–9.


they suggest that the wartime conditions had made wives more hesitant to abandon their marriage, be it for emotional or economic reasons, indicating that they in fact valued their partnership more, having experienced what it was like to have to cope alone.

Wartime infidelity on the part of both husbands and wives certainly contributed to breakdowns in the wake of war. Christian publications urged those returning from the Front to forgive their wives for any possible ‘missteps’, particularly as between 50% and 80% of men had also committed adultery during the war. In spite of this, men were slower and less inclined to forgive infidelity, as a survey conducted by Das Blatt der Hausfrau in 1950 shows. Asked ‘What would you do if your spouse had been unfaithful?’, 36% of male respondents declared that they would seek divorce, in contrast to only 13% of female respondents. The survey results demonstrate two important points: first, that women declared themselves prepared to turn a blind eye to infidelity in spite of knowing through wartime experience that they could cope alone, and second that men were quicker to seek divorce at this time. The reason so many more men filed for divorce in the postwar period may have been due to the surplus of women, and the fact that as a result men had more chance of finding a new wife. Viewed in terms of the balance of power between the sexes after the war, far from women being dominant in this period, divorce cases would suggest that men were in a much more powerful position.

Table 29.1: Divorce, 1910–1953

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year (1)</th>
<th>Divorce per 1000 inhabitants</th>
<th>Divorce per 1000 existing marriages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>8.91</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>11.21</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>16.80</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>18.77</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>16.85</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>15.66</td>
<td>7.0 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>11.61</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>10.48</td>
<td>4.7 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>9.67 (1)</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. 1939 Reichsgebiet: Area as it stood on 31 Dec. 1937; from 1946 West Germany.
2. Not including married women whose husbands had gone missing.
3. Estimated.
4. Of course we would like to know the figures for these intervening years; however, they are missing in the Statistisches Jahrbuch records.

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Contemporary fears and imagery of the strong woman were far more widespread than the reality of women’s attitudes to their ‘new’ independent position. In most cases the reality of running a household alone was not a desirable one, it was a double burden. Women’s increased involvement in the workplace was due to the practical reality created by the shortage of men. Women worked out of financial necessity because men were still away or dead. And even when husbands did return after the war, circumstances forced some wives to keep working. When a woman was employed this was usually because she was either alleinstehend or because her husband’s income was insufficient to support them both. In some cases this was because couples had lost their house and possessions and had to rebuild their lives from scratch. Need rather than personal motivations often brought women into the workplace, as a Brigitte article of December 1955 emphasized: ‘The word “must” is of primary importance . . . Millions of women work for this reason—even when they absolutely do not want to work’. Pointing out some of the less desirable realities facing women with the double burden of looking after a family and holding down a job, the article continued,

Does anyone think that it is fun for women to get up at six, take their children to playschool and then hurry on to the factory or office? And then in the evenings shop, cook and afterwards wash up? At the weekend, washing, ironing, darning and patching, and general cleaning of the home are on the to-do list. It is energy draining and undermining of one’s health.

Given the choice, most women would have relinquished their extra tasks. The National Socialists had certainly encouraged women to see themselves as predominantly wives and mothers, but this was how many women saw themselves anyway, in Germany as in many other countries in Europe at this time. Given that the circumstances after the war made holding down a job and running the household even harder than it would have been under normal peacetime conditions, not to mention the fact that women’s wages were sometimes as much as 40% lower than men’s, the postwar situation was hardly an ideal time for women to enter the workplace for the first time.

The Second World War did not bring a radical change in mindset regarding gender roles. Women’s independence, in terms of coping without men both emotionally and financially, was viewed as a temporary change enforced by practicalities. There are several hints of this unchanged outlook in Constanze. One woman wrote to Constanze’s problem page, explaining that ‘My husband lost his job through the denazification process. I am thus forced to earn to support us and our three children.’ The use of the

48 Das Blatt der Hausfrau (Nov. 1948); Ruhl, Verordnete Unterordnung, pp. 12, 331; Von Oertzen, The Pleasure of a Surplus Income, p. 30.
50 Meyer and Schulze, Wie wir das alles geschafft haben, p. 180.
51 Beate Hoecker and Renate Meyer-Braun (eds), Bremerinnen bewältigen die Nachkriegszeit (Bremen, 1988), p. 194.
52 Moeller, Protecting Motherhood, p. 25.
word ‘forced’ (gezwungen) is very telling of how traditional gender roles were firmly ingrained in her mind. Similarly, 23-year-old Beate K., mother of eight-month-old Peter, reluctantly acknowledged on 1 August 1945 that she would have to take up a job if her husband did not return imminently, but added hopefully ‘But you’re coming soon, aren’t you? You are probably already somewhere on your journey back to me.’ Her hope was of course partly derived from a simple desire for reunion, but there is also a sense that she would put off getting a job until it was absolutely essential. The majority of women’s attitudes to their own position had evidently not changed.

Suggestions that women were toughened by war neglect to mention how difficult conditions for mere survival were. These conditions wore down women’s strength and endurance rather than the opposite. Rather than ‘surprising themselves with their capabilities’, evidence indicates that women did know their limits and the circumstances after the war came very close to this boundary. During the war there was a severe shortage of labour in Germany caused by the conscription of so many men into the armed forces. In western Württemberg, one wife, who had been trying to run the family farm while her husband was away, died in childbirth in March 1943. The doctor who treated her diagnosed the cause of death as severe overwork. ‘In particular mothers and wives suffered from being overburdened by work’, noted sociologist Helmut Schelsky in his survey of German families after the war. After the war housewives only received the basic ration allocation, even though their levels of activity were often the equivalent of an engine driver or a miner, who received more food. Indeed women were responsible for procuring, dividing up and controlling food supplies in the home—tasks which could be both physically and emotionally demanding. ‘If you put everything together, the result of this state of emergency is often serious mental exhaustion’, a contemporary report on the social conditions in the Berlin district Zehlendorf concluded on 28 March 1947. Commenting on the wearing impact of the difficult conditions, it went on: ‘The ability to withstand nervous and emotional difficulties has disappeared. What’s left is fatigue, apathy or despair.’

Doctors and social workers pointed out that housewives were particularly prone to chronic exhaustion and this could only be alleviated by better nourishment. Instead, however, many women were doing without a part of their own ration and giving it to their husbands and children. This state of exhaustion was not new to the period after the war. Security Service reports had reported the war-weariness of women in 1943. Rather than crusading to improve their lot then, most women who...
survived in these conditions were ‘apathetic and individualistic, concerned about food rather than democracy’.\(^{61}\)

Females who had to support a family on their own often struggled financially. One such case was Hermine P., who had to support herself and her child alone after her husband was declared missing in 1943. When her war pension stopped in 1945, and her money ran out, she took up a job in a magistrate’s court. The money was terrible so she supplemented it by working in the evenings on her typewriter.\(^{62}\) Another wartime mother, Irene B., waited for the return of her husband at the end of the war. She explained how the financial support from social services provided less than half the money necessary to support her family.\(^{63}\) For middle-class women, many of whom were undertaking paid employment for the first time, the double burden was more of a shock than for working-class women, many of whom had worked before the war. Nevertheless the inimical circumstances of the time were worse than usual for all, regardless of class. In 1948 Constanze conducted a survey of women managing on their own. It revealed widespread difficulties as women coped with working and caring for a family on a single and frequently insufficient wage. One participant in the survey explained that she could not sleep because she was so worried about holding everything together.\(^{64}\) Women did not, then, find their new responsibilities so easy that the role of the male as breadwinner was ever seriously threatened.

For all that circumstances had opened up the world of work and offered women a chance to be independent from men, the reality was much less desirable. Wartime mother Elisabeth L. described her difficulties in managing the demands made of her. On 18 February 1944 she wrote to her husband Max:

\begin{quote}
I haven’t been able to sleep for a long time. It feels like I would receive an admonition from you: don’t let the children want for love. Don’t forget the little darlings amid the enormous amount of work. But it is so difficult to do everything and also to be a good mother to the children.\(^{65}\)
\end{quote}

Luise S., aged 43, was a mother of two who had taken over the family-run garden centre in Fellbach when her husband was called up. She also described being at the end of her tether in a diary entry of 18 August 1944: ‘Oh, I’m so tired of struggling,’ she wrote. ‘How long will I have to put up with this misery?’ she asked, nine months after her husband Paul had been declared missing. She went on:

\begin{quote}
Why am I not just lying beneath the rubble? There are always so many difficulties to negotiate and it is really not in my nature to be a battler. I’m in despair . . . I don’t know if you are ever coming back or if you’ve been dead for a long time. And I would so like to be able to relax again . . . With all the worry and concern about you, on top of the general situation, it is as if a great weight is pressing down upon me.\(^{66}\)
\end{quote}

There is no sense from these statements that wives were merely reassuring their husbands that there would be a role for them on their return. Children of war wives corroborate

\begin{flushleft}
\(^{62}\) *Constanze*, 9 (July 1948), p. 10.
\(^{63}\) DTA Reg. Nr. 131, Irene B.
\(^{64}\) *Constanze*, 16 (Oct. 1948), p. 5.
\(^{65}\) DTA Reg. Nr. 454/III, Elisabeth L.
\end{flushleft}
this picture of struggling, overburdened mothers, later remembering how difficult their mothers found it coping alone during this time. ‘When I think of my mother back then, I can only picture her working. During the war I saw my mother cry a lot’ recalled one daughter. Another explained, ‘She used up her last reserves of energy. I could see that as a child.’\textsuperscript{67} Wives thus had a hard time struggling alone in wartime.

‘We noticed how much women missed their husbands and their significant help with this or that heavy bit of work, both in the home and also with the bomb damage’, wrote Nikolaus Gross, noting how the everyday difficulties posed by war were so much more difficult for wives to bear because they lacked their husbands’ support:

And even more difficult than everything else was the fact that women were without the love and companionship of their husbands. They were lonely and had to cope with everything by themselves, when they really craved companionship. For the children’s sake, they had to show a happy face, yet they themselves were often in desperate need of comfort.\textsuperscript{68}

Husbands also knew that they were needed by their wives and families back home, as Wilhelm B. noted in his diary: ‘It is hard to go off to war when you know how much you are needed at home.’\textsuperscript{69} These statements by men, which emphasize how much wives


\textsuperscript{68} DZI 10662, Nikolaus Gross, \textit{Rückkehr zur Familie} (Heidelberg, 1947), pp. 15–16.

missed the support of their husbands, possibly served to reassure the authors themselves that there would be a role for them in the home upon their return. But in light of the desperate female voices we have heard, it seems plausible that their views were not exaggerated and reflect the fact that many wives genuinely struggled without their husbands.

The general attitude to the double burden enforced on women is revealed in a *Das Blatt der Hausfrau* article in March 1949, entitled ‘Work and Home’, which automatically presumed that women had too much to deal with and offered coping strategies to the weary mothers among its readers:

Above all, you should not demand too much of yourself. Try to simplify the running of your home as much as possible. Content yourself with the fact that you have done the most important things . . . Just try to create as little work for yourself as possible.  

The journalist went on to warn these women not to burn out. She told them to be wary of getting too tired and stressed by all the burdens:

Those who, at the present time, are stuck on the conveyor belt of everyday life, are pushed from early morning to late at night, often without leaving time to breathe . . . Their relentless diligence, and their never-ending productive activity, puts such people at risk of total collapse.

On 19 December 1945, housewife Beate K. found time once more to update her husband on her daily life. Describing the principal ways in which the shortages made her life difficult, she wrote:

There are new regulations everywhere for every piece of bread or meat and we have to read the paper carefully to find out what is available on the ration card. When I go shopping, people in the shops talk about nothing apart from food, foraging, and where goods can be obtained off the ration card . . . This everyday palaver is getting increasingly on my nerves. At home there is the constant worry about what we are going to cook . . . We lack so many of the ingredients that we need. So Gusti, housewives are certainly not having it easy at the moment.

Family separations placed a heavy burden on mothers. They alone were responsible for their children's welfare and education. With material goods being in such short supply after the war, mothers struggled to give their growing children much-needed clothing and food. Inside the home there was the struggle against the cold; windows were commonly only papered over; water supplies were often unusable for months. Washing and particularly the drying of clothes was difficult because of the cold. Some mothers deployed hot water bottles and heated stones. Others kept their children in bed to contain their hunger.

Exhaustion and despair threatened these struggling mothers. Victor Gollancz, the son of German-Jewish émigré Alexander Gollancz, was a left-wing journalist and publisher who lived in England. He described a case from his time as the British Welfare officer for Düsseldorf in October 1946, which offers an insight into

70 *Das Blatt der Hausfrau* (March 1949).
how burdensome the conditions were for mothers trying to provide for their children after the war:

A haggard and yellow-faced woman came in and you could barely hear what she said for her sobbing. Her two children had no shoes: she had been applying to the Wirtschaftsamt für Bezugsmarken since February, and had just been told to apply again next year. One of her children had died of malnourishment in 1943.75

Similarly, Charles Bray, an English journalist writing from Berlin for the Daily Herald, on 24 August 1946 found that women were struggling with the burden of coping alone:

One woman, emaciated, with dark rings under her eyes and sores breaking out all over her face, could only mutter self-condemnation because she was unable to feed her two whimpering babies. I watched her trying desperately to force milk from her milkless breasts—a pitiful effort that only left her crying at her failure.76

No doubt compounding the strain was the fact that these difficulties had not started with the end of the war, but rather with its outbreak six years before.

Many women yearned for the return of their husbands, for reunion represented the chance to share their responsibilities and heralded, at least in their minds, a return to a more stable form of existence. Although women coped, this did not make them tough or convince them that they could do without men—they ideally wanted their husband to come back and help. In July 1948 Constanze reported that many women were keen to give up the extra burdens created by their expanded role: ‘There are a large number of women who, with a sigh of relief, would gladly hand back the heavy burden of responsibility to the strong shoulders of their husbands.’77 So when one woman wrote to her husband on 28 April 1945 saying ‘hopefully you will be back with us soon. I care about you so much and cannot get used to being alone’,78 she spoke not only for herself but also for many others in similar situations.

One boy from Karlsruhe, who was four when the war ended, later described the impact on his mother of his father’s long absence after the war: ‘Worrying about the whereabouts of my father really tired out my mother’, he remembered. Nothing was harder than the uncertainty:

‘If only Daddy was here, everything would be a lot easier to cope with’ was a common refrain in the diaries and letters of wartime and postwar mothers who were managing alone.80

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77 Constanze, 9 (July 1948), p. 10.
Empowerment or Endurance?

In numerous diary entries across the war and postwar period, Elisabeth L. described her sense of vulnerability. Her descriptions of life after the war stand in stark contrast to the all-powerful, all-competent *Trümmerfrauen* portrayed in magazines after the war. On 20 November 1944 she wrote to her husband ‘In your lovely letters you call me your brave little wife, but so often I’m not that.’ In no sense had these changes been liberating for her. On 25 January 1946 she further complained:

It would do me so much good to be able to breathe freely again, without the incessant worry about you, the children, the shop, the future. How wonderful it would be to have you back by my side and to be able to deal with everything with you.

She was relying on her husband to return, as her letter from 18 November 1945 explicitly expressed: ‘Come! Oh come soon. I keep working, always with the thought that you will be able to take over from me when you return. Please write just once so that I know for sure that you are still alive.’

Wives across Germany agreed that their husbands were indispensable to family life. In Fellbach, Luise S. wrote, ‘I am living in the hope of our reunion. What will become of the children if you don’t come back? They could so desperately do with a father. Come back! Come soon! I am so tired!’

Wracked with worry at the possibility of facing the future without her husband, 34-year-old housewife Anne K. from Berlin confessed: ‘I can’t imagine my life just with the children . . . Daddy must come back to us. I want to and have to believe he will, otherwise I simply won’t be able to bear this life anymore.’

Another woman wrote to her imprisoned husband about how she was struggling to cope alone:

I am at the end of my tether . . . How am I meant to do everything by myself? I can’t do any more, I’m not up to it. I’m so weary of life that I just say yes to whatever the children say. Your absence is notable everywhere.

So even though wives probably did not want to make their husbands worry while they were away, they still wrote explicitly about the strain they were under—an indication of how seriously this affected them. Such letters do not really suggest that ‘these women learned to act in a way less subservient to men’.

Women were desperate for support, as the significant number who got involved with occupation soldiers indicates. Sometimes this was for practical reasons, hoping that their lover might be a source of extra food supplies or serve as a protector against the advances of other occupation troops. But many women were simply desperate to have someone around to help them negotiate the difficulties of the initial stages after the war. American troops often performed this role: ‘The essential kindness of the American soldier was in
evidence’ recorded an early American Intelligence report from Aachen. It went on: ‘Soldiers helped German housewives with their chores, played with the children and through other small acts of friendship made living more tolerable through the creation of a friendly atmosphere.’ If their husbands were not there, then substitutes were clearly necessary for some struggling mothers.

Women were both physically and mentally worn out by the experience of holding the family together during the war, and were, at least in their letters, demonstrably keen to hand over their responsibilities to their husbands. Theoretically of course, a woman could at the same time both be emancipated by her experiences of independence and also miss her husband. But women’s voices from the time do not suggest that this was the case. On the whole women viewed their enlarged sphere of responsibility as a temporary arrangement that was enforced by the war, not a milestone for their own personal development. Women were extremely exhausted after the war, and not poised to lead a revolution in gender roles.

There is no sense in Elisabeth L.’s letters that the independence enforced on her by circumstance had rendered her husband redundant, or that the experience of coping alone made her question the man’s role in the home or in society. She stressed on many occasions that she wanted to return to the prewar norm, in which her husband was there to assume the commanding role in the home. On 23 December 1945 she addressed her husband, demanding: ‘Come home soon. I so want to be rid of all the responsibility . . . It is all so difficult and so hopeless.’ Sceptics might argue that women such as Elisabeth L. only expressed such sentiments in a bid to reassure their husbands that there was a role for them at home on their return. However the consistency of such expressions and the very real sense of desperation and hopelessness that these letters convey make this seem highly unlikely. In a later letter, for example, Elisabeth L. again made the point that she felt overburdened by her enlarged sphere of responsibility:

Oh how easy it all was before, when you had all the responsibility. I only needed to act out what you had come up with, so I didn’t have to make decisions for myself. When all was said and done you took charge of everything. I’ve only realized this since I’ve had to make decisions for myself. And even then, when I’ve made a decision, I am so unsure and I often worry if it was the right one. It is not in my nature to act independently, but I am nonetheless forced to do so.

According to a statistical research sample taken from 15,950 letters sent between husbands and wives during the war, 8% more wives than husbands expressed that they were looking forward to reunion in the final year of the war, further undermining the notion that women’s wartime experience had rendered men redundant to them. Apart

90 These statistics were collected by reading one in every ten letters written by men at the Front who had wives and children back home. Letters were selected at random on the basis that they fulfilled these criteria. These results were derived from a broader statistical research sample based on 1,595 letters out of a sample of 15,950 letters written between 1939 and 1945. In collating these figures, I read every tenth letter of correspondence between husbands and wives, asking a specific
from 1941 and 1944, when 1% more husbands than wives mentioned looking forward to reunion with their spouse, wives consistently expressed looking forward to reunion with greater frequency. This suggests that women were keen to share the double burden of home and work life.

While women were waiting for news from their husbands, they pinned pictures of their captured or missing soldiers to the notice-boards of railway stations in the hope that, seeing one, a returning comrade might bring them news. When they had exhausted the avenues provided by the Red Cross, Protestant and Catholic welfare organizations, they turned to the newspaper advertisements of dubious firms, who offered search services. For at least fifteen years after the end of the war, West German women placed advertisements in veterans’ newspapers, hoping that their husbands’ former comrades would contact them. Fortune-telling also became much more popular. In 1951 the magazine *Der-Die-Das* reported that the practices of clairvoyants had become more scrupulous. No longer did customers pay 10 Pfennig to see their future via a letter which a parrot or budgerigar would pull out of a box. After the war, fortune-tellers studied the horoscopes of each customer to learn about their future, and these services no longer cost only 10 Pfennig. All these measures were simply indicative of the fact that women were longing for the return of their husbands.

Of course, no amount of longing for husbands to return expressed either on paper or through actions such as consulting fortune-tellers could in itself guarantee that family relationships would be entirely harmonious following reunion. Voices from wartime letters cannot tell us exactly what happened after the war was over. Some women, for example, may have grown more used to being independent than they thought, so that living with a husband again proved to be a difficult adjustment. Unfortunately personal sources, so abundantly accessible through wartime letters and diaries, are in far smaller numbers for the period post-reunion, as women generally tackled the emotional and practical issues that they faced, rather than bearing witness to them on paper. Nonetheless, wartime letters, which reveal how female authors felt about their expanded role, strongly indicate that women had not relished the independence that was thrust upon them, which in turn suggests that the resumption of prewar gender roles would be welcomed rather than rejected.

When men returned home defeated and humiliated after six years of war, and several more as prisoners of war in Allied camps, they were often physically and psychologically...
damaged by their experiences. In comparison to the healthy, well-fed and well-dressed occupation troops who were presiding over their conquered territory, returning soldiers, who were often bewildered by the state of their homeland, appeared weak and emasculated. Of those who returned, 92% were eventually able to resume their position as breadwinner for the family, and in so doing fulfill the wishes of the many wives who longed to ditch their waged work as soon as possible. But many returners initially suffered from physical problems which prevented them from taking up employment immediately. This could be frustrating for tired wives who had longed to have the support of their husbands and had expected their man’s return to bring relief. Soon after her husband’s return, Helene Karwentel, a mother of one from Berlin, became frustrated that he just seemed to sit around at home while she was struggling to make ends meet for their family. Charlotte Wagner, also a mother from Berlin, became increasingly impatient with her lethargic husband, who appeared to lounge about the house while she went out to work. She recalled feeling resentful that her husband’s return had merely created more work. Wives also struggled to overcome the emotionally distant behaviour of their returning husbands as they adjusted to civilian life once more. Like many others in her position, one wife explained: ‘I constantly tried to figure out what I could do to find him again.’

Women too were exhausted by the war, yet it most often fell to them to nurture their husbands back to health. If those returning were often initially ‘broken men’, this could explain why women have been seen as comparatively stronger, both by politicians at the time and later by historians. However, the polarized discourse about weak men and strong women masks a more complex reality. Though women were superior to men returning from war and prisoner-of-war camps in their understanding of how life after the war functioned, in particular the bureaucracy surrounding the procurement of food, this hardly constituted an enormous power that they held over men. That women were running the household after the war was no radical change from the prewar period—this was their traditional sphere. And even if returning men had wanted to have a greater understanding of the changes in this sphere, these would not have been difficult to grasp. Life at home after the war was, in effect, no different in this sense from before the war, when women were also fundamentally in charge of running the home.

The mental and physical weakness of returning soldiers did not mean that women were automatically the stronger sex post-reunion. This would underestimate the level of


95 LAB. B. Rep.012. Nr.7.


97 DZI 3949, Bohn, Die Heimkehrer aus russischer Kriegsgefangenschaft, p. 39; Frevert, Women in German History, p. 262; Meyer and Schulze, ‘Krieg im Frieden’, p. 189; Moeller, Protecting Motherhood, p. 29; Niehuss, Familie, Frau und Gesellschaft, p. 115.
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...suffering and exhaustion incurred on the home front. The challenge of readjusting to life as a couple in very changed circumstances was made all the greater by the fact both partners were mentally and physically exhausted. Neither one sex nor the other alone was drastically weakened, rather in fact both sexes faced challenges resulting from the war. Notions of a gender power reversal in the wake of the Second World War were thus not nearly as clear-cut as current scholarship suggests.

For women who had been on their own, mere survival had been a burdensome struggle. Rather than these years being ‘the heyday of women’, they constituted a decade of struggle and difficulty which many wives wished would end. For many women it was the prospect of relinquishing these tasks in the imminent future that gave them the strength to continue. Women had successfully filled the gap in the workforce created by the Männerrangel. Fearing that traditional gender roles had been eroded by this, Family Minister Würmeling declared himself to be the ‘Protective Patron of the Family’ in the postwar period, using his position within the Cabinet to advocate the traditional nuclear family with clearly defined gender roles for men and women within it. As it turned out, women were not pressured back into resuming traditional roles within the home. As men returned, convalesced and then entered the workforce once more, women were predominantly glad, where this was materially possible, to return to the security of their roles in the home and the private sphere. Fears and imagery of the ‘new woman’ in the interwar years were far in excess of the reality for most women, and this was also true of the ‘strong woman’ of the postwar era. Many women were only too happy to return to their traditional role as ‘only’ wives and mothers.

Conclusion

Though the war had pushed married women beyond their traditional roles, after the war they longed to resume their prewar roles. This was by no means because they felt that these ingrained structures were ideal, but rather because in the emotional and practical chaos of the time, which did not lend itself to reflection about revising embedded


100 DZl XVE3 21755, Der-Die-Das, 1 (1951), p. 8.

101 Frevert, Women in German History, p. 266.

structures, traditional gender models were the most obvious representations of peacetime normality, which both sexes so keenly craved. Therefore, it was not only conservative politicians who wished to preserve prewar structures within the home—so too did women themselves. The re-emergence of the traditional family model in the wake of the Second World War was thus as much the result of popular aspirations ‘from below’ as of government policies imposed ‘from above’.

If contemporary observers postulated that the relationship between spouses had changed to a more equal partnership as a result of wartime experiences, a public opinion poll from 1949 found that in fact the majority of couples had ‘resumed their old authority patterns’. From our perspective today, we can see that this enforced period of female independence may well have affected the process of women’s emancipation in the long term, even if it was a hard and painful process, which women at the time viewed as a burden. Nonetheless, it was because these German war wives clearly retained traditional attitudes regarding their role within the family that some feminist historians write of women’s missed opportunities (verpasste Chancen) in this period.

Abstract

As German men were conscripted into the armed forces during the Second World War, more and more wives were left to manage their families alone. At the same time more women than ever entered paid employment to fill the gaps in the market left by their soldier husbands. Scholars working in the field have made much of the dislocation to gender roles prompted by the Second World War. This article questions whether women’s wartime experiences changed their views on being confined to the home. Ultimately, this article argues, women wanted to return to a sense of normality at the end of the war. In the aftermath of defeat, in which mere survival rather than speculation about potentially improved models of the family setup were paramount, ‘normality’ was most obviously represented by prewar gender roles. Women were hoping for normalization, not only in the public sphere in the sense of a flourishing economy, but also in the private sphere with the return of the men and a resumption of the old role divisions. It was therefore not only conservative politicians who wished to preserve prewar structures within the home—so too did women themselves. The re-emergence of the traditional family model in the wake of the Second World War was thus as much the result of popular aspirations ‘from below’ as of government policies imposed ‘from above’.

Keywords: women, hour of the woman, gender, family, the Second World War, letters, Germany, history of experience

Clare College Cambridge
hlv20@cam.ac.uk

103 Rita Polm, ‘Neben dem Mann die andere Hälfte eines Ganzen zu sein?!’ Frauen in der Nachkriegszeit (Münster, 1990), p. 185.