FROM ADVENTURE AND ADVANCEMENT TO DERAILMENT AND DEMOTION: EFFECTS OF NAZI GENDER POLICY ON WOMEN’S CAREERS AND LIVES

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In June 1934 the girls in one Münster Gymnasium graduating class received their diplomas with great pomp and ceremony. But immediately after the celebration, the mood among the graduates turned somber and many of them wept. These female graduates had been warned that “it would be utterly pointless” to continue their studies.1 The new National Socialist government, which had come to power the previous year, was founded on the belief that men and women were fundamentally different. In 1933 Josef Goebbels, Propaganda Minister, announced the intention of the National Socialist state to “liberate women from women’s emancipation.” Harking back to an imagined pre-industrial era when male and female gender roles were clearly differentiated, Adolf Hitler promised that in the Third Reich every woman would be able to marry and answer her calling to bear children. These promises were backed by National Socialist policies that restricted women’s roles in public and supported them at home. The twin aims of eliminating male unemployment and creating an Aryan nation, dictated motherhood and domesticity for all “racially pure” women. Doing so slammed shut many educational and professional doors newly-opened to women after the First World War.

Initial National Socialist policy decisions limited women’s educational opportunities, closed professional options, and excluded all but a few women from the political arena. Simultaneously other policies encouraged and supported motherhood, as Nazi leaders paid lip service to raising the status of women’s domestic role. But how did women perceive this ideologically-driven effort to shape their lives? How did they respond to it? And how do they today understand those decisions made so long ago? This article argues that despite the Nazis’ devastating attack on women’s education and employment, many women remained resourceful and resistant to state efforts to shape their behavior. Far from dutifully following the policy dictates of the National Socialist regime, women instead assessed the desirability of employment, motherhood, and participation in Nazi organizations through the lens of their own personal interests. Their personal perspective was of course strongly influenced by class, geographic location, polit-
ical views, and religious beliefs. Individual women’s personalities also helped them as they adapted to – or struggled against – the state effort to shape their lives. While some careers were blocked or interrupted, others were encouraged and promoted. Some women refused to resign themselves to domesticity, while others embraced motherhood. Many of those who became mothers viewed this as either a legitimate hiatus in their career paths or a way to evade other specific policy demands.

The role women played in Nazi Germany has been debated by historians. The HistorikerInnenstreit (Women’s Historians’ Debate) first launched a discussion as to whether women could be perpetrators of a racist regime even as they were victims of a misogynist regime. Since then many studies have examined women’s roles in Nazi Germany. They have richly described the Nazis’ aim of drawing all “racially pure” Germans out of families and into service for the nation. Even as the National Socialists limited women’s educational and professional options, they issued a call to them to participate in the National Socialist Women’s Organization (NSF) and Reich Mother Service, volunteer to help wounded soldiers, sew for the war effort, work on farms, teach ethnic Germans in the occupied territories, as well as run the autarkic private households that supported the Nazi Four Year Plan. The Nazis launched a separate call to “racially pure” girls and younger women to join Hitler’s “Revolution of Youth” and to serve the nation in the League of German Girls (BDM). Within the BDM, members hiked and participated in athletics to develop healthy, fit bodies. They served soup in train stations, collected money for the poor, sang songs to wounded soldiers, and, after the war began, traveled to the far corners of the Reich to help build the Volksgemeinschaft (national community). These activities, all designed to build girls’ feelings of comradeship and to indoctrinate them with the National Socialist worldview, expanded the lives of young girls and women far beyond traditional women’s roles. Some historians have even argued that the Nazis’ mobilization of women in non-traditional roles was modern. But not all women were equal in the eyes of Nazi policy. Intense racism and persecution characterized the treatment of women who were marked as either non-German or “racially inferior.” While these studies tell us much about National Socialist policy, they tell us far less about how individual women organized their lives around the opportunities and constraints imposed by the Nazis.

This article uses interviews with ten women to understand how Nazi policy affected their life decisions. These women belong to neither the working-class nor the peasantry. In accordance with the myriad opportunities opened to women in the 1920s, they all expected to complete their educations (all but one with the Abitur, university qualifying exam), attend university, and work in professional jobs. By examining how these privileged women navigated the shrinking options open to professional women in Nazi Germany, this article offers a more nuanced perspective on Nazi gender policy. In particular as girls became women, wives became widows and workers, and workers became mothers throughout the Nazi era, their relationship to Nazi policy changed making the policy’s impact far less pre-
dictable than has previously been described. As this article demonstrates, the kind of education and level of training women had also markedly influenced their experiences in Nazi Germany. Moreover women’s work ambitions and political outlook were often decisive in how successful they were in launching their professional lives. Furthermore Nazi policy itself was in a constant state of flux. Ideologically-driven policy decisions of the early years shifted once the practical realities of rearmament and war became apparent.

The way these women remember their lives under National Socialism has been influenced by the passage of time, the process of forgetting, and revisions to the collective memory of the National Socialist regime. Whereas in the immediate postwar era, public explanations blamed Hitler and his henchmen for the Nazi crimes, subsequent historical scholarship, media, and autobiographies have revealed a more widespread societal and personal responsibility. This collective revision of memory in turn influenced the private memories of individuals. As E.J. Brüggemeier has emphasized, individual memory must be considered “in the context of collective justification and transformation.”

The women who volunteered to talk to me offered to do so for a variety of reasons. Many expressed surprise and relief that someone wanted to hear their stories. Others said they were interested in leaving a record of their lives or in helping me with my research. In thinking back on their careers or decisions not to work they were influenced by their current views of work and motherhood and of their perception of me – a young woman carrying out doctoral research with plans for marriage and a teaching career. As Daniel Schachter has argued “our memories of the past are often rescripted to fit with our present views and needs.”

Nearing the end of their lives, these women altered their memories of the past, both through forgetting and through repeated reinterpretation, to explain what did and did not happen. But oral interviews “tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did.” As scholars of memory have pointed out, all authors seek to make sense of their lives – to tell a seamless story. If the stories the women told differed from the reality they had long believed in, ruptures could occur, as when one woman broke down in tears remembering her long-repressed love affair. Interviews are also a dynamic process in which, to varying degrees, a trust is established. This trust can help to alleviate the self-enhancing and whitewashing that characterize many women’s memories, as when one woman, who assured me that she had thought nothing of the BDM, called me days after the interview to reassure me she really had enjoyed the youth group.

The women whose stories form the basis of this article provide an unique window into how women negotiated the Nazi policy designed to control their careers and lives. The article begins with an overview of Nazi policy toward women’s work and education. It then divides the interviewed women into three groups for examination. The first group had already launched their careers when the Nazis came to power. The second group of women had completed their education by 1933 and were ready to launch their careers. The women in the final group were
still in school in 1933 and thus chose their paths of education and work within the parameters set by the new regime. Understanding how women negotiated the policy demands on their lives provides a new perspective on the question of women’s status as perpetrators or victims in Nazi Germany. We also see the surprising degree to which women could assert agency under an authoritarian regime that was determined to control women’s lives.

Nazi Policy Toward Women: Education and Work

One element of the Nazi effort to promote motherhood was the closing off of other options to women. The educational system was an early target. Hitler asserted that “the goal of female education must be unswervingly the future mother.” Especially for women “intellectualism was rejected as unhealthy.” Beginning in grammar schools the curriculum was revised to incorporate the National Socialist worldview and racial ideology. The Nazis worried that girls who were academically inclined failed to receive adequate training in the domestic sciences thus alienating them from their natural calling. To combat this perception, beginning in 1935 all high school girls were required to take two hours of needle point in place of an hour each of English and math. Before being permitted to take the Abitur, girls had to pass a test “in the simplest domestic skills and knowledge including cooking, cleaning, sewing and mending.” Mandatory participation in the BDM reinforced the Nazi worldview and drew girls away from school influence, even eliminating Saturday morning classes. In 1938 girls’ education was further weakened with the introduction of the “High School for Girls – Domestic Science Form (H-Form)” designed, Reich Education Minister Bernhard Rust claimed, “not for intellectually less talented girls, but rather for talented girls who were less theoretical and more practically gifted.” The H-Form which downplayed math and science, eliminated Latin, and emphasized home economics, culminated in the so-called “pudding Abitur,” which was insufficient for university entrance.

As the Nazis dramatically changed girls’ post high school options, they created obstacles to women’s higher education. In June 1933, Reich Minister Rust made six months of service in the Reich Work Service (RAD) a prerequisite for university admittance and declared that “anyone who fails at the RAD, forfeits their right to become an academic in Germany.” Girls who for health reasons were unable to participate in RAD could work in the NSV Mother and Child or in RAD offices. In 1934, a Numerus Clausus was introduced to limit to ten percent the number of women in incoming university classes, reversing the trend in effect since 1918. In the years immediately after the Numerus Clausus, fifty percent of male Gymnasium graduates found places at the university but only one in seven female Gymnasium graduates did. The number of female university students nationwide fell drastically from 18,315 in the spring semester 1932 to 5,447 in 1939. At the Annette School in Münster, the percentage of graduates who pursued university study reflects this policy change. During the 1920s the rate of
university enrollment had varied from 75 percent in 1923 to 91 percent in 1927. In contrast, in 1933 the rate plunged to 34 percent and in 1934 it plummeted further to 5.6 percent. In sum, as Claudia Huerkamp has noted in an understated way, the generally poor economic situation, bad job prospects in academia, the prerequisite of RAD, and the *Numerus Clausus* together discouraged many young women from studying.

Nazi policy also targeted employed women. In a 1933 article in *Die Frau* Gertrud Bäumler pointed out that the Nazis regarded the legal grounds granted women by the Weimar Constitution as the “confusion of a rootless liberalism” and women’s employment as one of the “deformities of capitalism, which valued earning money above unpaid labor in the privacy of the home.” To rectify this situation, one of the Nazis' first acts, on June 30, 1933, was to expand the Weimar “Law Regarding the Legal Position of Female Civil Servants” and to strengthen its ban on “double-earners.” This law, which in the depths of the Depression enjoyed widespread political support, stated that female civil servants whose husbands worked could be fired without petition as long as their economic well-being was secure. In the succinct words of Erica Said, this law effectively “ended the constitutional guarantee of equality between men and women.” To encourage women to leave the job market in 1934 and to lessen the burden on women driven out of the job market, the Nazis introduced generous marriage loans to enable newly married couples to establish households. Since these loans were contingent upon the woman leaving the labor force, they created another means to open up jobs for men. The Nazis also took aim at specific public professions. Beginning in 1934, female physicians whose husbands were employed were not reimbursed when they saw patients covered by state insurance plans and in 1936 they were excluded from the mandatory three-year training programs. That same year Hitler announced that women could no longer be hired as judges or lawyers. Women who did not share the Nazi worldview were also driven out of their jobs. Among female civil servants, especially in the education fields, dismissal rates were so high that Wilhelm Frick, the Minister of the Interior, called for moderation.

Although the Nazis continued to insist that professional and civil service jobs be reserved for men, they never intended to drive all women out of the labor force. They in fact considered some jobs appropriate for women. Women who worked as nurses, social workers, or child care providers were praised for applying their feminine nurturing qualities in the public sphere. When the League of German Women’s Associations (BDF) dissolved in May 1933 it left working women with only the option of joining the Nazi movement. Some women welcomed this especially as the Nazis created jobs for women in “unprecedented numbers especially in the social service area.” In the National Socialist Women’s Organization (NSF) and the National Socialist People’s Welfare Organization (NSV) myriad jobs opened for women to run health and advice clinics, teach mothers how to parent and cook, and organize programs for other women. The NSV and NSF and the German Women’s Organization (DFW) also broadened the opportunities for women who wanted to actually engage in the Nazi movement. While the Nazis
did not want this work to conflict with women’s reproductive potential, they recognized that even mothers could contribute once their children were in school or grown. Realizing the enormous potential contribution these women could make to the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the Nazis did not hesitate to call on them. Since the great majority of women’s jobs were unpaid, they caused no drain on the Nazi coffers.

Agricultural work was another realm deemed uniquely well-suited to women, and the peasant woman was held up as an example by the Nazis to counter the negative influences of urbanization, modernization, and feminism. Despite the ideological appropriateness of agricultural work, many young women opted to leave the land in pursuit of more exciting and less strenuous jobs in cities. As a result, the number of women in agriculture continuously dropped throughout the Nazi era, raising grave concerns. The shrinking labor force put such great burdens on the remaining rural workers that in some cases it even compromised the birth rate. To combat this trend, beginning in February 1938, all women who wished to work in factories or offices were obligated to work in agriculture or as a domestic for one year first (*Pflichtjahr*, Duty Year). This plan, designed to increase the number of agricultural workers and provide hands-on help in child-rich families, was only a partial benefit since untrained help was of limited value.

Despite the Nazi theory that women should not hold industrial jobs, by 1936 when Germany had recovered from the Depression and was re-arming, the Nazis themselves realized that they needed women’s work to fulfill the Four Year Plan. As a result they removed the requirement that women leave the labor market to qualify for a marriage loan. In fact many working-class families depended on women’s income to meet their daily expenses. The Nazis even argued that repetitive assembly-line work, which they deemed inappropriate to men’s “nature,” was particularly suitable for women because such a mindless activity allowed women to contribute to the family income and serve the state’s needs without demanding any mental detachment from family and home. Despite their need to recruit women into the labor force, the Nazis were hesitant to improve working conditions for female industrial workers who complained about low wages, poor promotion prospects, and inflexible hours. Although even the German Labor Front (DAF) supported higher wages for women, employers consistently fought increased labor costs. Some firms like Siemens had their own support systems for female workers including subsidized housing and day care and resisted government interference.

Not until rearmament intensified and the war began did the real contradictions in National Socialist ideology become glaringly obvious. In 1940, the magazine *Die Frau* announced that “today the academically talented woman not only can study, she is expected to train and work, where she can accomplish the most.” Even some kinds of professional work – medicine and teaching – were reopened to women during the war when manpower shortages became acute. In 1941 the Nazis removed the obstacles for H-Form graduates to study at the universities. Although male Nazi students continued to scorn female students and the
Nazis emphasized the temporary nature of their call on women to study, women flocked to the universities. By 1944 fully forty-nine percent of students were women.\footnote{32} Moreover, during the war, women studied not only in fields deemed appropriate for women, but in all fields.

Aside from professional women who wanted to enter the labor market, the Nazis lacked a comprehensive plan for mobilizing women into the war effort. As Ursula von Gersdorff has pointed out, this resulted in a mobilization of women that proceeded discontinuously.\footnote{33} Hitler worried that conscripting women would contradict their biological role and might even cause outrage among women and damage morale. Because some women, who had never before worked, volunteered after the Poland campaign, many Nazi officials deemed conscription unnecessary. In reality in response to worsening working conditions (the elimination of the ban on night work and the lengthening of the work day in particular) and the closure of non-essential factories, the number of women working fell three percent in the first months of the war.\footnote{34} Many women who volunteered preferred to work part-time.\footnote{35} By 1941, many employers were short of workers.\footnote{36} Despite the obvious need to do so, Hitler refused to issue an overall conscription order.\footnote{37} Instead he voiced his special concern that married women’s safety at work should be guaranteed. Franz Seldte, Reich Minister of Labor reinforced this dilemma. On the one hand he asserted that women, who were indispensable to the Four Year Plan, needed to be better instructed as to the vital role they played in the Nazi economy. On the other hand he emphasized that “Women should only work when it can be demonstrated that there are no health risks either to themselves or to the Volk as a whole.”\footnote{38} As the war continued, the double-burden of housework and employment caused many female industrial workers to be classified by the Nazis as in “lacking in discipline.”\footnote{39} Not until 1942 did the Law for the Protection of Mothers in Gainful Employment” improve working conditions and provide maternity benefits. As Rüdiger Hachmann has pointed out “Even more than before, the pregnant worker was to be taken under the state’s protection.”\footnote{40} In 1943 employed women were also granted a “washing and household day” twice a month. From the perspective of many employers, however, this only made women more problematic as employees. Some employers favored hiring foreign workers from Poland and the Soviet Union, who could be employed cheaply and without any legal protections.\footnote{41} Finally in January 1943 the Nazis conscripted women between the ages of seventeen and forty-five into war-related work. In 1944 when Hitler declared “total war,” they raised the upper age limit to fifty. Even this met with limited success since middle- and upper-class women found ways to avoid conscription and Nazi officials were hesitant to confront them. In May 1944 only forty-five percent of women over fourteen were employed.\footnote{42} As opinion polls reveal, working-class women resented a double-standard that made them the only women for whom war work was mandatory.\footnote{43}
1936, working-class girls were visited at home by “career advisors” who pressured them to do agricultural work.⁴⁴ Such blatant pressure was applied less intensely, (if at all) in the upper classes. The better off also worked in agriculture, in child-rich households, in kindergartens, in factories replacing new mothers, and in the occupied territories, but only temporarily as members of RAD and the BDM. When the war began, recruitment intensified for all young women. In the summer of 1941 young women were mobilized to work for the war effort as RAD service was extended from six to twelve months, with the second half designated for Krieghilfsdienst (war service work) in armaments factories, ammunition institutes, arsenals, in the internal offices of the Wehrmacht, in transportation offices, and in hospitals. The number of women in the Krieghilfsdienst rose from 30,000 to 50,000 in 1938, to 100,000 in 1939 and to 150,000 in 1941. Though initially girls were not called up for explicitly military tasks and were kept in Germany for safety, allied bombing made this safety illusory. Moreover by spring 1944 girls were helping with anti-aircraft defense and in January 1945 they began working spotlights.⁴⁵ Many firms also recruited young women to replace the male workers who were being drafted, even establishing training programs for them. In March 1941 Thyssen AG, for example, introduced a two-year training for women as “office helpers in the industrial economy.” Although training programs temporarily increased women’s options and opportunities, in the long run “it meant the permanent inscription of women’s disqualification and a disadvantage of women as opposed to their male colleagues.”⁴⁶ The integration of women also did not challenge the fundamental belief that after the war, women’s primary focus would return to family and household.

Nazi policy was ideologically-driven, but rife with contradictions once the war began. As we have seen, what the Nazis really wanted was the flexibility to call on women to mother or work to meet the nation’s shifting needs. This article examines how ten women born between 1902 and 1918 negotiated Nazi gender policy. These women all grew up in Westphalia, a region divided between industry in the south, textile production in the north and agriculture in the east. Münster, the major city in the region, relied primarily on civil service administration for employment. None of the women in this article belonged to the working-class or grew up on a farm. Instead all but one grew up in families that expected them to take the Abitur and to be employed, at least until they married. They said their families were not devoted to National Socialism, though many were nationalist and supported their daughters’ involvement in the BDM. Family concerns about the National Socialist regime, when they existed, focused primarily on religious matters. Finally, these women all lived in West Germany after the war. Because they were between fifteen and thirty-one when Hitler became chancellor, these women confronted Nazi policy at different stages in their lives. While certainly not representative of all women in Nazi Germany, I argue that the twists and turns these women experienced were not unusual for professionally-bound women and can teach us much about individual women’s ability to maneuver around an authoritarian state’s demands.
Adapting Careers to Nazi Dictates

Frau Gethmann\textsuperscript{47} (born 1907) trained as a nurse at the Kaiser Wilhelm Diakonissen in Koblenz before specializing in psychiatric nursing at the Protestant Women’s Aid Society in Soest, Westphalia. She completed her training in 1927 after working three and a half years at an inpatient psychiatric institution. By the time the Nazis came to power, she had already launched a successful career in psychiatric nursing that the Nazi assumption of power did not disrupt. In 1939 she returned to school to train as head of nursing in her Gau (state). In speaking to me Frau Gethmann emphasized how hard she had worked, and how, after continuously rising through the nursing ranks, in 1942 she became Gau Oberin (Head of Nursing) in Northern Westphalia. As she said “then I was in charge of the entire nursing system [Schwesternwesen].” She proudly remembered that she had worked steadily from 1927 to 1977 and denied categorically any political influences on her work. When asked explicitly what impact the Nazis had on the nursing field she recalled simply that “free nurses,” those nurses not connected to either the Protestant or Catholic church, belonged to the National Socialist German Organization of Nurses. As Gau Oberin she oversaw both the Nazi free nurses (“brown nurses” as they were called) and the church-affiliated nurses.

Frau Gethmann consistently denied any direct political influence in nursing. Historians have identified a process by which nurses were kept or dismissed depending upon their support of National Socialism – but this process did not enter her story.\textsuperscript{48} As a ranking psychiatric nurse she also was probably involved in or at least aware of National Socialist policy regarding “asocial” and non-Aryan patients. Instead Frau Gethmann maintains that she stayed above the political fray: “I didn’t step into the light, I was a parochial nurse and I was never put in a political light. I was not a party member; I was completely independent. I just had my job and I did it.” Frau Gethmann’s promotion to Gau Oberin seems to imply a high degree of political allegiance to National Socialism or at the very least, skillful accommodation. Had she disagreed with Nazi aims, but successfully masked the fact so as to be promoted, would she not have revealed this in her story? Ultimately I was left wondering just what role politics did play in her career and how memory colored the story she tells.

Though Frau Gethmann had little to say directly regarding politics and nursing, she was more outspoken about her decision to forgo motherhood in favor of her career. She described herself as a successful career woman – unhindered by any political regime. In summarizing, she said “I worked. Worked a lot. And today I am still very proud. If you ask me whether I wish I had married, I would say that I am sorry that I do not have any children.” In her mind marriage and work were mutually exclusive. Frau Gethmann said she turned down one marriage proposal because “I needed life, liveliness and vitality, you see. I needed things going on around me. The idea that I would just sit at home and cook a bit and wait for my husband to come home, that was not the right thing for me.” She feels she was not isolated because of her decision, but rather became part of a wider community.
of unmarried, working women. Some in her group had lost fiancés in the First World War and “could not bring themselves to marry other men.” Others could not find husbands because so many young men had died in the war. In Frau Gethmann’s estimation, these women felt no pressure to marry and were fully committed to their work. Though she did not emulate the Nazi ideal and bear children, she and her friends did choose careers the Nazis viewed as appropriate “womanly” work and so were able to succeed professionally in spite of a regime that discouraged women’s professional ambitions.

Frau Schmitt (born 1910) studied to be a kindergarten teacher in the girls’ high school in Gelsenkirchen. Since the Nazis considered caring for children both inside and outside the family to be women’s work, it is perhaps not surprising that Frau Schmitt remembers the Nazi assumption of power as a happy time, and has glowing memories of her attendance at the 1936 Reichsparteitag in Nuremberg. In 1934 she enthusiastically opened a National Socialist People’s Welfare Organization (NSV) kindergarten which she ran until she married in 1936. She and her husband gratefully accepted a marriage loan and she readily quit her job to run their small household. Frau Schmitt never planned to have a career. In 1939, however, just six months after her son was born, Frau Schmitt’s husband, a farmer, died; three months later the war began. As she put it “these three facts completely changed my life.” Her husband left her no pension, and in her frantic search for work she sent her son to live with relatives. When the NSV asked her to run a newly-acquired kindergarten in a rural village, she was overjoyed because she thought “here my little Klaus can grow up.” Her training as a kindergarten teacher coincided with the Nazi plan to take over child care, allowing her to transition from widow to worker without sacrificing her role as a mother. She ran the NSV kindergarten until the war ended, enabling parents in this small town to tend their fields without worry about their children.

When asked about political influences in the NSV kindergarten, she responded without hesitation that there had been “absolutely no political guidelines.” She remembered only playing with the children and doing lessons. Frau Schmitt was open in describing her support for National Socialism and felt that running an NSV Kindergarten represented her contribution to building the Volksgemeinschaft. Doing so also allowed her to earn her livelihood and care for her son which, of course, gave her good reason to remember the Nazi era positively. When the Catholic church reclaimed the kindergarten after the war and fired her, Frau Schmitt left town and did a variety of farm jobs to provide for her son until she remarried in 1950. She then returned to work as a kindergarten teacher where she remained until she retired at age eighty. Although she enjoyed the children, she said she never felt the extra thrill of contributing to a larger social cause as she had in the NSV Kindergarten.

By the time Frau Schumacher (born 1903) finished two years at the Berufspädagogisches Institute in Berlin in 1932 studying needlework and home economics, the Depression was at its depth and she felt there was “absolutely no prospect of finding a job, absolutely none.” Although she wanted to return home
to Paderborn, the Catholic authorities convinced her to stay in Berlin and work with unemployed, Catholic girls. She ran the first Caritas sponsored Arbeitsdienst (Work Service) center on Alexanderplatz in Berlin to help keep unemployed girls from troubled families off the streets. She felt the work was important since the girls were “off the streets and, at least for the moment, they enjoyed an orderly life.” When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they took control of the center and sent Frau Schumacher for a month’s training to become a RAD home-leader. When she returned to work, she was unconcerned to discover that instead of unemployed girls her charges were female students, who suddenly needed work certificates to enter the university.

Frau Schumacher was soon relocated and promoted to “Leader of Work Service” and she and the Work Service Girls [Arbeitsmaiden] in her charge helped farmers, many of them new settlers, in their homes and fields. Frau Schumacher remembered this as “the most wonderful time of my life.” Though her story began without direct praise of the Nazi regime, Frau Schumacher appreciated the exciting role the National Socialist program played in her life. She showed me her photograph collection pointing out the visits from important Nazi officials, the Nazi slogans painted on the walls, and the hard work “her” girls did. When asked what her daily responsibilities encompassed, she said “my real job was, yes, I was responsible for the training and care of the girls. I cooked and took care of their physical well-being and I also taught them Brandenburg history and so forth...We were so happy. What more could we want?... My parents were dead; I was all alone, here I was happy... I had my career and was...excited. Excited, very excited!”

Despite her early enthusiasm, politics ultimately caused a break in Frau Schumacher’s career. In 1936 her eldest sister wrote her a letter warning her that she could see the “other side” of National Socialism and advising Frau Schumacher to get out while she still could. At the moment her sister wrote, Frau Schumacher was about to be promoted to Bezirksführerin (regional leader), a position which would have made her responsible for many RAD camps and offered her a salary and a nice car. Frau Schumacher dearly wanted to accept the new position and her sister’s letter threw her into mental turmoil. The promotion necessitated joining the Nazi party which, her sister warned, might have negative consequences in the future. Ultimately heeding her sister’s advice, “with a very heavy heart,” Frau Schumacher left the RAD program and returned to school. Her first year was miserable since all she wanted to do was return to the Arbeitsdienst, but she persevered. When asked why she had failed to see what her sister saw in National Socialism, she explained that “I didn’t want to see. We were out of the way and the girls worked and it was really productive work. It was not in vain. And we were so happy. I can’t tell you how excited we were.” Eventually Frau Schumacher lost her blind admiration of the National Socialists, but she blamed Hitler’s henchmen, rather than him, for all that went wrong. When she graduated in 1939, teachers were in short supply and she launched the career she continued until retirement. More than any of the other women I interviewed, Frau Schumacher re-
membered her time with RAD uncritically as the “most wonderful time of my life.” None of her subsequent years equaled the RAD years.

The fate of women already in the labor force when the Nazis came to power depended to a great extent on their field of work and their political beliefs. Women like Frau Gethmann, the nurse, whose jobs fit the Nazi ideal of “womanly work” and who accommodated themselves to the new political realities, could pursue their careers relatively unimpeded. Frau Schumacher’s experience as a teacher reveals how women supportive of National Socialism could find rewarding work and rise up through the ranks. Both Frau Schumacher and Frau Schmitt changed course midstream. Although Frau Schumacher left the RAD program to train as a teacher, the Nazis’ dire need for teachers made her transition to teaching smooth. Moreover, the limited duration of her early enthusiasm for National Socialism did not jeopardize her future as a teacher. Once widowed, Frau Schmitt rejoined the workforce and her political enthusiasm and training in “woman’s work” enabled her to find a good kindergarten job which combined motherhood with work. Both Frau Schmitt and Frau Schumacher described missing the feeling that they were contributing to a larger mission after 1945. None of these women was punished by the “Double Earner” campaign and none challenged the gendered idea of appropriate women’s work. Other circumstances would have caused major disruptions in their career paths. These life stories illustrate that for women who supported, at least tacitly, National Socialist politics, personally and economically fulfilling work was possible within the fields the Nazis approved for women.

Careers that Clashed with Policy

Women whose professional ambitions fell outside the bounds of traditional gender roles faced far more formidable obstacles in their pursuit of work. For them even political conformity was insufficient to allow professional advancement. Frau Müller (born ca. 1911) graduated from law school in 1936, the same year that Hitler decreed women’s exclusion from the legal profession. By that time, as she put it, “the National Socialists had already established this attitude ....It [practicing law] was totally and practicably impossible.” Law school career counselors unequivocally told her to choose another career. She quickly learned “that the only thing open to me was...I could have been director of a women’s prison. That was the only job they suggested for me.” Since this bore no correlation to her dream of presiding as a judge, she experienced a profound disruption in her career path. Facing a landscape in which all legal careers were closed to women, Frau Müller married and started a family. Her husband even jokingly accused her of marrying him only because she could not don a judge’s robe. In Frau Müller’s case, as in many others, the decision to focus on the domestic was involuntary and very much resented.

Even after Frau Müller had three children and was coping with the ever-expanding burden of domesticity in wartime, she continued to yearn for a public role. Since the legal profession remained off limits to women for the duration of
the Nazi era, Frau Müller decided to volunteer her time with the National Socialist Women's Organization (NSF). During the war, she regularly held lectures teaching other mothers how to assume the necessary role as disciplinarian in the absence of their soldier-husbands. She also kept her legal expertise alive by giving presentations about "Inheritance Law in Rural Areas." For NSF leaders, Frau Müller was an ideal role model: as a mother of three whose husband was serving his country on the Russian Front, she could speak from a position of personal experience. Although the work fell far short of her desired career, it did diversify her otherwise domestically-bound life.

Not until after the war did Frau Müller enter the legal profession and today she identifies herself primarily as a retired lawyer. Her residual resentment of the Nazi disruption of her career (and the extinguishing of her aspirations to join the judiciary) is matched by her horror at her own active participation in the NSF. Although she claims never to have been a Nazi enthusiast, she did choose to work for the local NSF when launching a law career proved impossible. Moreover, her legal competence and willingness to participate strengthened the NSF program and its appeal to other women. She attributes her having ignored the horrors of the National Socialist regime to her preoccupation with the difficult task of rearing her three children by herself in wartime. This does not prevent her from being highly critical of her own failure to recognize the greater truth. As she put it “we were not all heroes.”

When Frau Dewald (born 1910) completed her studies at the University in Hamburg, she took a position student teaching. But when she finished her student teaching in 1934, the combination of a preference for men and a shortage of jobs meant there were no full-time positions available to women – even single women. In contrast to Frau Müller, who is still angry at her initial inability to practice law, Frau Dewald emphatically downplayed the limits the Nazis placed on women in the civil service and their implications for her life. Though Frau Dewald did not find a teaching position, she was offered a job as sports director in the BDM. She was assigned her own car to drive around to Westphalian villages to bring National Socialism to rural girls. This position allowed her to combine her desire to lead with her love of sports and of children. As she spoke to me decades later, she beamed with pride while recalling how she signed the athletic badges that the girls earned. In no uncertain terms she claimed that this “became my life” and “I became someone.”

Despite her love of the BDM, Frau Dewald retained her strong desire to teach. In 1939, when the male teachers in Detmold were drafted, she left the BDM to pursue her career in the classroom. And just as Frau Schumacher had also discovered in 1939, the draft created openings for female teachers that had, just years earlier, been slammed shut by the Nazis. Frau Dewald continued to teach even after she married in 1940 and by 1944 she was the only teacher remaining at the school. She remembers her career development as seamless. The pleasure she had leading the BDM erased any resentment or frustration at not finding a teaching job initially. Though Frau Dewald acknowledges the true nature of the Nazi
past, she refuses to connect it to her personal story. For her the BDM was athletics and fun; the value of sports was not compromised by the regime’s criminal record. She does not condemn the Nazis but rather resents the school inspector, who temporarily suspended her in 1945 because he believed her BDM past might “poison” [vergiften] her students’ minds. This is a view she finds entirely unjust. Frau Dewald feels no responsibility for the fact that her enthusiasm and talent attracted many girls into the BDM. Ultimately in 1946 her suspension was revoked and she was rehired. She taught in the same school until her retirement becoming, by all accounts, one of Detmold’s most beloved teachers.

If Frau Müller’s legal career was blocked and Frau Dewald’s teaching career was delayed, Frau Ziegert’s attempt to pursue a professional career was characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability. When Frau Ziegert graduated from the University of Breslau in 1933, the bleak job market for women drove some of her classmates to give up and return home to their parents. She told me that “hardly anyone...rather, no one, had any prospects.” Only those who needed money, or like Frau Ziegert, were determined not to have “studied in vain” persisted in the public sphere. Since she could not find a job teaching, as she wished, Frau Ziegert took a job leading a group of Protestant girls, whose church youth group was being forcibly merged with the BDM. As a Christian woman, she hoped to help the girls even though she was hired to convert them to National Socialism. This job, which she remembers as somewhat ludicrous, ended after only a few months, since Frau Ziegert did not have the necessary political credentials. She then enrolled in a social work training course at the Health Department under the auspices of the NSV. Since social work was defined as a female “nurturing” profession, a low-status job not sought by men, women’s job prospects in this field were good.55 Frau Ziegert’s first position assisting so-called “fallen girls” as they sought jobs and housing, appealed to her because it fit within her own Christian worldview. Though the Health Department was under Nazi influence, Frau Ziegert initially felt no pressure to join the NSDAP or to be active politically. This abruptly changed in 1935 when she failed to greet the Kreisleiter (county leader) with “Heil Hitler!” and, to her dismay, was promptly fired. The idea that such an offense could cost her her job was devastating to Frau Ziegert. Luckily a colleague intervened on her behalf and she was reinstated.

By 1938, Frau Ziegert was frustrated with the limits of her job, which offered no opportunity to advance, no control over her daily work, and an increasingly pernicious political climate. Surprisingly given her Christian worldview, she did not mention or criticize the racial profiling she almost certainly encountered as a social worker for the NSV. Convinced that only education would open the door to job advancement, she returned to the university to get her doctorate. Although the research project she proposed was accepted and she enthusiastically began to conduct research on German immigration, she says she was inexplicably denied access to her sources after a short time. At this point despairing of ever pursuing a career, Frau Ziegert left the job market altogether, moved home to her parents, and did volunteer social work in her church. After six months, however, she
found a job as a “career counselor” [Berufsberaterin]. Although this was not teaching, it did put Frau Ziegert in an academic environment working with students. It was here, rather than in her own experience, that she became fully aware of how drastically Nazi gender policy curtailed women’s career options. Frau Ziegert’s superiors told her that outside of “women’s jobs” (social work, child care, and nursing) the girls “could only become teachers or doctors.” That the Nazis had reopened the fields of teaching and medicine reflects one of the dramatic policy shifts which occurred during the Nazi era, caused not by a shift in ideology, but by a necessary adjustment to real world demands. By the late 1930s retirement, political disillusionment, and the exclusion of women from training had led to a sharp decline in the number of teachers. In medicine, the elimination of Jewish doctors and the very low number of women practicing greatly added to the burden for remaining doctors. This manpower shortage coincided with a tremendous increase in workload as doctors were asked to determine and document the “racial worth” of the entire population. After the war began, escalating casualty rates made the shortage of doctors more dire still. As a result, universities reopened their doors to women wanting to study education and medicine. Frau Ziegert nonetheless found the limitations she was compelled to place on young women’s professional dreams distressing.

What the Nazi era taught Frau Ziegert was that women had to be persistent and creative in searching for professional positions. Finding the teaching field closed, she tried youth work and social work before settling into a career in counseling. It was a common pattern. The Nazis not only limited women’s educational opportunities, they also prevented them from pursuing the careers for which they were trained. Thus many women were forced to change positions frequently, and were unable to advance professionally. Many women, like Frau Ziegert, came to see their careers as jobs and as a small proof that they had “not studied in vain.” But it was not the fulfilling life work to which they had aspired.

All three of these women had been strongly influenced by the Weimar Republic’s declaration of women’s equality with men. Although all eventually had careers, the shape their careers took shifted on account of Nazi policy. Only Frau Dewald successfully built the career for which she had originally trained. The shortage of teachers in the late 1930s allowed her back into teaching while the scarcity after the war meant that her tarnished political past did not hinder her in the long-term. By contrast, Frau Ziegert switched tracks from youth leader to social worker to career counselor. The general satisfaction she felt advising Gymnasium students and her optimistic disposition lessened the frustration she felt in thinking back over her career. Of the three women Frau Müller was the most bitter. Antifeminism prevailed in the legal field throughout the Nazi era and into the 1950s. Though ultimately she was able to establish a career in law, she resented the ban she faced under the Nazis, and was keenly aware that the years she had lost undermined her professional success. Moreover she is haunted by the knowledge that she had compromised herself politically to stay even marginally professionally active.
Coming of Age in a Nazi Job Market

In contrast to women who had already launched their careers when the Nazis took power, young women who had not yet finished school by 1933 had Nazi ideology imposed on them at an early and formative stage in their lives. National Socialist changes in the high school curriculum subjected girls to an education heavily influenced by Nazi ideology. Moreover, the BDM played an increasingly influential role in the society, if not in every school. Girls were made to understand the new state’s expectations for Aryan girls and women, and many felt called upon to serve the nation. While the BDM and RAD offered young women opportunities for adventure greater than had been available to previous generations of women, permission to study at the universities was curtailed, certain professions were closed to women entirely, and other career paths were severely limited. The life-stories discussed in this section reveal how these somewhat younger women tried to balance Nazi policy demands, family expectations, and their own career aspirations.

Frau Kresting (born 1916) says she knew from a young age that she wanted to have a career outside the home. Though she was never fond of school, the BDM appealed to her. Immediately after graduation — with a *pudding Abitur* — her strong BDM credentials and unwavering enthusiasm for National Socialism won Frau Kresting acceptance in a BDM leadership school. At the recommendation of another leader she enrolled in the one-year training program in “gymnastics and athletics instruction” at the University of Münster. Frau Kresting loved the program: “it was such a super training program! I started with gliding, skiing, rowing and so forth. It was really the thing for me.” The Nazi emphasis on sports in their youth groups created a high demand for athletic instructors and many athletically-inclined women followed this career path, especially if they found themselves excluded from the universities. Rather than staying with the BDM, Frau Kresting continued her training by completing a program in physical therapy. When her first job as a physical therapist cut her work hours, she worked for the BDM and as a substitute sports instructor in the local schools during her free time. As the months went by, Frau Kresting felt that with her BDM experience, athletic talent, and solid support of National Socialism, she could make a bigger contribution to the Nazi state elsewhere. She overcame her desire to stay close to home and took a position as athletic instructor and BDM leader in a private boarding school for “wealthy noble girls” fifty miles outside of Berlin. The school leaders, who did not support National Socialism, hoped that by organizing the girls into the BDM they might prevent further governmental interference. Though Frau Kresting enjoyed the girls, her ambitions led her to seek a greater challenge and when she was offered a more responsible position in Dessau overseeing 2,500 women at sports evenings, she accepted. The Nazi authorities told her that the stress of constant air raids and food shortages was causing morale to decline among the city’s women. They hoped that if Frau Kresting organized sports evenings, she could boost the women’s morale and strengthen their support for the war. She believed the position would allow her to make a real con-
tribution to the war effort. When she arrived in Dessau however, she was shocked to discover that “Nothing had been prepared, nothing was offered to me. I was supposed to get the whole program off the ground.” Before she could decide how to deal with what seemed to be an impossible task, her mother summoned her home on account of her father’s health. With relief she returned home.

For the remainder of the war, Frau Kresting moved from job to job. After a brief period of unemployment she took a job as athletics instructor at two girls’ high schools in Dortmund, but after only three months the students were evacuated. Her next job was caring for evacuated children in Riga. She believed the children needed her; she enjoyed the sports, and she felt she was contributing to the war effort. In 1943 Frau Kresting was transferred [hinversetzt] by the Nazi authorities to another children’s home in Albeck on the Baltic Sea. During her stay in Albeck, (January—July 1944), she saw a different side of National Socialism. Everyday the Nazi “bigwigs” [Bonzen] arrived at the children’s homes in their “fat Mercedes” to feast on the food designated for the children. They ate breakfast at the first home, lunch at the next home, and “afterwards coffee at the next. Yes, that was how it was. They were the golden peacocks.” Frau Kresting and the other teachers were left to explain to the children why they were hungry. She was horrified and became disillusioned with National Socialism. She says she suddenly realized: “It was rotten to the core.”

Frau Kresting’s political disillusionment led her to rethink her life. What she really wanted was to throw the “entire nonsense out and study.” By this time in the war, university enrollments had fallen so drastically that the Nazis dropped the extra prerequisites previously associated with the “Pudding Abitur.” Frau Kresting still needed permission to quit her “war-related” job, however. After a delay of several months she was finally granted permission to leave Albeck in August 1944. Before she could enroll in the University in Münster, however, the university was closed on account of the war, and as she put it: “with that my dream to study was destroyed.” She reluctantly re-joined the war effort nursing wounded soldiers, and there she met her future husband.

When the first of her seven children was born in 1946, Frau Kresting, a disillusioned woman, settled into a domestic existence. Only after her husband died in 1969 did she return to work as a nurse. At the age of fifty-nine she retrained to work with the deaf. Though she is proud of what she accomplished late in life, her career fell far short of her dreams. More succinctly than most women, Frau Kresting told me: “Because of Hitler my life turned out all wrong.” Although she was referring specifically to her inability to enter the university, her allegiance to National Socialism had been extremely damaging to her personally. Instead of persevering in the job for which she had trained, she changed jobs seven times in twelve years, always seeking to help the Nazi state. Once she realized that the Nazi state was corrupt, her career path lost its meaning. Only starting over at the university had held any promise and the war dashed this hope. Marriage and motherhood allowed her to avoid the implications of limited job prospects, an incomplete education, and a sullied political past.
Although Frau Kresting joined the NSDAP and chose her jobs to help the Nazi state, her subsequent disillusionment with National Socialism allowed her to describe herself as a “fellow traveler” [Mitläufer] rather than a staunch believer. Some young women, who actively supported Nazi ideology to the very end and benefited from the wide array of opportunities in the BDM, RAD, and Kriegsdiensst, as did Frau Schnabel\(^6\) (born 1916), have little choice but to recognize the full impact of having made a career in the Nazi hierarchy. Frau Schnabel was eight years old when she first joined the Wandervogel, a youth group with a back-to-nature bent. In school she learned that the Versailles Treaty was a betrayal and that the Nazis would restore Germany’s greatness. At the personal level, she believed the Nazis would vindicate her father’s death in the First World War. As a result, even before 1933 Frau Schnabel joined the BDM. Her early enthusiasm coupled with the Nazis’ desperate need for leaders paved the way to her promotion to a leadership position even before she had graduated from high school. She played a crucial role in Detmold where “the Hitler Youth needed to build a mass movement out of thin air.” Since the time commitment was so enormous, she dropped out of school and dedicated herself entirely to the BDM. Frau Schnabel’s work was unpaid until 1937 when she threatened to leave unless she was paid. The Nazi leadership acquiesced and she was given a paid desk job in addition to the BDM work she continued to do.

In 1944 Frau Schnabel married a soldier she knew from her early years in the Wandervogel. Although women generally left the BDM after they married – “since they had their husband and household to care for” – Frau Schnabel was obligated to continue to work on account of the war. Only when her husband returned from the front lines severely wounded was she granted a special dispensation to leave her job to take care of him. While she was nursing her husband back to health the war ended, shattering Frau Schnabel’s world. “In May the war ended and the Americans were upon us. We had nothing to eat and everything collapsed. No one knew what would come next. And then my eldest child was born.” Frau Schnabel had not wanted to have a child so soon, “but that was a consequence of our having no way to protect ourselves.” As she became aware of the enormity of the Nazi crimes, she retreated into the private sphere. She bore and raised four children under a cloud of guilt and regret. She, like many other women, faced the problem that her personal independence and career were linked to a criminal regime to which she had dedicated her youth.\(^6\) Frau Schnabel never returned to the labor force; had she tried, her lack of a high school diploma would have been a severe handicap. In the end, her incomplete education was less crippling than the burden of guilt that paralyzed her. She described to me that the agony was not just a question of years lost, but also of years spent destructively.

Younger women who did not support National Socialism as vigorously Frau Kresting and Frau Schnabel faced more severely limited career opportunities. For many women, the educational system presented the first obstacle. Claudia Huerkamp has argued that the Numerus Clausus “thwarted many women’s lives and career plans,” but she also argues that anyone with money, proof of Aryan descent, and decent RAD performance, could study. Women who lacked any of
these prerequisites found the political roadblocks formidable. When Frau Rohde (born 1916) passed her Abitur in 1935 she wanted to study medicine at the university. Because her parents did not support National Socialism she had never joined the BDM: lacking proof of membership she could not be admitted to the university. To rectify the situation she joined the BDM. Though she remained highly skeptical of National Socialist ideology, she was relieved that her troop leader was a school acquaintance. Frau Rohde assumed that her connection to the leader would be sufficient to win her the necessary documentation even if she did not actively participate. Instead to her astonishment Frau Rohde was expelled for non-attendance: “and as a result, I never got the certificate and could not study at the university.”

With her university plans dashed and her aversion to National Socialism intensified, Frau Rohde buried her disappointment and searched for a job. Because of her fluency in French and English, she was hired as a telegraph operator. Although she was good at her job, she had no interest in devoting her life to a non-professional career and viewed her work solely as temporary. She married in 1940 and after she bore her first child, she quit her job. Life as the wife of an absent soldier and mother filled her days and allowed her and her daughter to live off the allowance for soldiers’ dependents until the end of the war when her husband returned and re-entered the job market. As the mother of a young child, Frau Rohde was excused from war service work and she avoided all National Socialist organizations. She never returned to work. In recalling her life, Frau Rohde emphasized how the Nazis had robbed her of a chance to study medicine and how she, as a result, had studiously avoided any political engagement.

Not all women wanted careers or were lured by the opportunities created by the Nazis. Even women who expected to lead traditional lives, however, found their plans derailed by the Nazis. Frau Krämer (born 1918) never planned to go to high school or to take the Abitur since in her family the privilege of study was reserved for sons. In her eyes, work was an economic necessity until marriage, a woman’s primary goal. As Margot Schmidt discovered in interviews with women in Duisberg, “women aligned themselves naturally to the wishes and needs of their families.” When she finished school, she remained at home and worked as an intern in a hotel kitchen. Only after her youngest brother was drafted in 1939, could her parents afford to send her to commercial school [Handelschule] where she received training in typing, shorthand, and business accounting. Her first job was in the office of a cigarette factory. Unlike the working-class women in Duisberg, Frau Krämer felt no pressure to do agricultural or household work. Although she had belonged to the BDM, and at one point had even led a group of younger girls, she viewed it solely as fun – the only opportunity for girls in her small town. Given her own adamant claim that politics were men’s responsibility, it is no surprise that she considered the work she did for the BDM apolitical.

But the war disrupted Frau Krämer’s life course even if Nazi gender policy did not. As a single woman, she was called up in 1941 to contribute to the war effort and given a choice between work for the Red Cross or for the military news service [Nachrichtendienst]. She opted for news service and was sent to Münster for
three months of training. At the end of the training she learned that she would be sent to the Ukraine – a possibility she found exciting. As she eagerly awaited her departure date, however, her fiancée, who was fighting on the Russian front, wrote her that she should do whatever necessary to avoid being sent to Russia. Though this admonition shattered her new dream, she followed his advice and obtained a doctor’s certification that an ear infection prevented her from wearing the requisite ear phones. She then trained as a Telexoperator [Fernschreiberin] and was sent to Brussels, Berlin, and Danzig in the line of duty. In 1944 at her fiancé’s insistence, she gave up her job with the military and went to work in her aunt’s restaurant near Detmold. For Frau Kräm er the work and traveling she did as a Telexoperator was far more exciting than anything she had imagined and she loved it. Despite this, she did not hesitate to quit at her fiancé’s insistence. She worked in the restaurant even after the English army appropriated it since her advantageous food allotment enabled her to nurse her fiancé back to health. Once he was strong enough to work, they married and started a family, putting Frau Kräm er back on the life path she had always envisioned for herself. Unlike Frau Rohde, she never considered marrying or starting a family during the war. For her, as for many other women, the benefits of marriage during the war were minimal and the risk of widowhood too great. Like the other women in Frau Kräm er’s family, she never returned to the labor market.

National Socialist politics directly altered the lives of girls who graduated high school after 1933. Not only was their education infused with Nazi ideology, but their access to the university was severely curtailed and directly tied to politics. An unwillingness to accommodate cost many women, like Frau Rohde, their chance to study at the university. For those who sympathized with National Socialism, the range of party-related “jobs” (many volunteer) was extensive. Both Frau Kresting and Frau Schnabel spent virtually the entire era working for the Nazis. Young women like Frau Kresting who agreed to move around the country were essential to the Nazis’ success. But as her case shows, this was not always in the women’s best interests. The Nazis were interested in building and sustaining their movement, and the personal sacrifices made by women were of no concern. Frau Schnabel’s incomplete education would have proved problematic in any career except motherhood. Even women who tried to follow a private path to marriage and family found their lives inexorably drawn into the Nazi world. Frau Kräm er postponed her marriage when her fiancé was drafted and, like thousands of other young women, worked for the Kriegshilfsdienst.

The way Frau Schnabel, Frau Kräm er, and Frau Kresting remember and explain their actions during the Nazi era is influenced by the collective revision of the history of National Socialism by Germans, but also by their desire to justify themselves and establish “some sort of continuity in their life stories.” All three women retreated into private life after 1945, but their memories of how National Socialism impacted their lives differed. Frau Schnabel, who attained the highest BDM position, was by far the most troubled by her work for the Nazis, but she also left the Nazi movement with her ideological worldview still intact. Frau Kresting was equally committed to National Socialism, but her earlier disillu-
sionment allowed her to distance herself from feelings of guilt. Moreover, her discovery that National Socialism was corrupt and her belief that the Nazis ruined her chance to study medicine left her feeling like a victim rather than a perpetrator. Finally, although the war interrupted Frau Krämer’s life, her ability ultimately to marry and live the domestic life she had always expected allowed her to minimize the impact of the Nazis when telling her life story.

Conclusion

By examining the life stories of women from the National Socialist era, this essay has demonstrated the many ways Nazi policymakers decisively influenced women’s life experiences, while also noting the great variation among those experiences. While some women were able to continue – even advance – in careers they started in the 1920s, other women found their paths blocked. When they were not allowed to realize their professional plans, some women retrained for jobs deemed acceptable by the Nazis. In fact women who were willing to take certain positions – as kindergarten teachers, BDM leaders, telexoperators, and NSF speakers among others — found jobs with relative ease. Other women opted out of the labor force altogether. Because the Nazis feared that conscripting mothers to work would conflict too Starkly with their own pronatalist agenda and undermine soldiers’ morale, motherhood remained an escape from paid work at least for those women who could economically afford it. For many postwar women motherhood proved an acceptable escape from the fraught labor market and their own political history. In general, these interviews reveal that women whose educations were complete in 1933 fared better in the labor market over the long run than did women who tried to start higher education after the Nazis came to power. Many women had to postpone or shift their goals, but still managed through perseverance to launch careers. Often their careers fell short of their original goals – a would be judge became a lawyer, a would be teacher a career counselor – but nonetheless they had careers. In contrast, younger women who found the doors to education closed were more likely to take one of the array of positions the Nazis opened to them. Some even opted out of high school to better serve the nation. When the Nazi era ended, those women who had not completed their education faced a university bias toward returning soldiers, an unclear future use for the skills they had acquired during the Nazi era, and a desire to settle down and start families. These impediments coincided with societal expectations in West Germany in a way that hindered many younger women from launching careers.

Women’s memories of the Nazi era also showed tremendous variability. One of the most common tendencies among women was to deemphasize Nazi influences on their lives. Women who enjoyed the Nazi era’s opportunities as BDM leaders, kindergarten teachers, or nurses and launched successful careers describe their lives as governed by personal and seemingly natural choices, confirming what Daniel Schacht calls the “egocentric bias.” Frau Dewald felt “lucky,” to join the BDM; Frau Gethmann attributed her rise to the position of Gau Oberin to her own hard work. Older women whose careers proceeded smoothly throughout the
Nazi era tend to see the Nazis as having had minimal impact. Some women, like Frau Ziegert the career counselor, remember their employment history positively even though the Nazis blocked their careers of choice. Even Frau Rohde, who admits that her lack of political qualifications prevented her from enrolling at the university, claims her lack of political qualifications prevented her from enrolling at the university, claims her decision to marry and start a family was purely personal. Similarly, another mother of four, who received the Honorary Cross for German Mothers, remains indignant at the insinuation that her decision to have a large family was anything other than strictly personal. Many young women, who joined the ranks of the BDM, RAD, and Kriegshilfsdienst did so less out of conviction than because they believed the time between school and marriage should be spent working and enjoying life to its fullest. In holding this view they do not differ markedly from their counterparts in the 1920s in Germany and elsewhere in Europe.

Only a few interviewed women credit Hitler’s policies with strongly influencing their careers or lives. Frau Kresting, Frau Schnabel, and Frau Müller provide three very different cases of women who blame Hitler for destroying their professional lives. For all three, motherhood served as the escape from professional disappointment. Because Frau Müller had completed solid legal training before being excluded from the field, she later succeeded in building a long-delayed legal career after the war. In contrast, Frau Kresting and Frau Schnabel spent the Nazi years working within the Nazi hierarchy. Once the Nazi regime had fallen, their experience was a hindrance to further career advancement. None of these women credits the Nazis with having had a positive impact on her career, perhaps because to do so would be unseemly. These women’s decision to retreat into motherhood was never challenged in part because it coincided with West German politicians’ belief that “restoring women to an inviolable family safe from state intervention” was crucial to the postwar order.

The level of personal responsibility women accept and describe for participating in National Socialism also influenced their lives after 1945. Some women were permanently scarred by their experiences during the Nazi era. Unable to overcome their guilt, they retreated into the private sphere. Although the Federal Republic’s emphasis on full-time motherhood may have discouraged women from turning their BDM experiences into postwar careers, for women, like Frau Schnabel, the guilt they felt was decisive in pushing them from the public sphere. Not all women felt so burdened, however. Frau Schumacher attributes her participation and her enthusiasm to her youth, which she believes provides a certain protection from guilt and blame. Other women separate the sports they loved from the politics that they – at least now – see as criminal. Those women who described an early departure from the Nazi movement (or insight and disillusionment arrived at before the war’s end) were able to distance themselves from guilt. But the relative absence of feelings of responsibility for Nazi atrocities did not necessarily encourage women to participate in postwar politics. As this article has demonstrated, many women attribute their decision to forgo postwar politics less to a reaction against National Socialism than to a rejection of politics itself.
Most of these women said they believed politics was for men or that motherhood posed obstacles for participation.

The impact of selective memory clearly also played a role in how these women remember their lives. One is left wondering how believable a supervisory psychiatric nurse is when she claims that politics played no role in her work. How could she have failed to see the dramatic impact of racial (in some psychiatric institutions, murderous) practices the Nazis instituted? How could a trained lawyer, who volunteered to lecture and lead public meetings for the NSF believe that she was too busy raising children to see the evil side of National Socialism? Ironically it was the most sympathetic woman, whose Christian worldview allowed her to keep a distance from National Socialism who was the only woman “denazified” after 1945. In stark contrast, some of those women most involved in furthering the National Socialist agenda later successfully retreated into motherhood and were not “denazified.” Frau Kresting, the only interviewee to join the NSDAP, told me explicitly that she did not need to be denazified because she was a wife and mother. Others also retreated quietly into the domestic sphere.

What, then, can be concluded about the varied impact of National Socialist policy on women’s careers and lives? Although the Nazis introduced policy in line with their ideology about appropriate roles for women, economic reality, especially after the war broke out, forced the National Socialists to shift policy. In the end, what the Nazis wanted was the flexibility to demand that women mother, but also to push women into the workforce when the state’s labor needs changed. This article shows that professionally-bound women were not simply victims or perpetrators; the result for individual women was uneven. For those whose professional choices coincided with Nazi ideas about women’s work and who embraced National Socialist politics, the professional path could be smooth. For other women whose professions were deemed “male,” or whose politics were suspect, professional delay, demotion, and exclusion more accurately describe their experiences. Some women found the closed path to their chosen careers reopened later during the Nazi era due to shortages in the labor force, while other women reestablished their interrupted careers only after 1945. Women’s ability to launch careers in the Nazi era was influenced not just by changing policy toward women’s work, but also by each woman’s age, choice of career, personal politics, perseverance, and sheer luck.


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ENDNOTES

1. All names have been changed to retain anonymity of the interviewees. Interview Frau Ziegert, conducted by the author, tape recording, Münster, 29 November 1994.

2. For a review of this debate see Claudia Koonz, “A Tributary and a Mainstream: Gender, Public Memory and Historiography of Nazi Germany” in Karen Hagemann, Jean Quataert eds. Gendering Modern German History (New York, 2007): 149ff.


7. More than one woman asked me if I planned to have children and offered her advice on balancing work and family.


19. Huerkamp, Bildungsbürgerinnen, 86.


21. Moreover if a woman’s livelihood disappeared through death or divorce, she had no claim to her previous job.


23. Ibid, 112.

24. Von Gersdorff, Frauen im Kriegsdienst, 41.

25. Jobs were especially, but not exclusively in the areas of Reichsmütterdienst (Reich Mother Service), Mutterschutz (Protection for Mothers) and the Volkswirtschaft-Hauswirtschaft (Volk-Economy and House Economy). For more information see Lisa Pine, Nazi Family Policy (New York, 1997), Michelle Mouton From Nurturing the Nation to Purifying the Volk (Cambridge, 2007); Jill Stephenson, Women in Nazi Society (New York, 1975); Irmgard Weyrather, Muttertag und Mutterkreuz: Der Kult um die ‘deutsche Mutter’ im Nationalsozialismus (Frankfurt, 1998).


31. Quoted in Huerkamp, Bildungsbürgerinnen, 89.


33. Von Gersdorff, Frauen im Kriegsdienst, 43.


35. Ibid, 339.

36. Von Gersdorff, Frauen im Kriegsdienst, 53.


38. Stibbe, Women, 88.

40. Ibid, 354.
41. Ibid, 348-353.
43. “Der grösste Lumpen im Ganzen Land das ist und bliebt die Denunziationen während der NS-Zeit” in Hermann Niebuhr and Andreas Ruppert, Detmold im Dritten Reich (Bielefeld, 1998): 787-803; SD Berichte Nr. 107, 22.7.1940 und Nr. 210, 11.8.1941.
45. Von Gersdorff, Frauen im Kriegsdienst, 68-70.
46. Schmidt, “Krieg der Männer,” 142-143.
47. Interview Frau Gethmann, conducted by the author, tape recording, Münster, 16 January 1995.
50. Interview Frau Schumacher, conducted by the author, tape recording, Münster, 28 January 1995.
51. Interview Frau Müller, conducted by the author, tape recording, Münster, 20 January 1995.
52. For more on the increased burden of housework under the Nazis see Nancy Reagin, Sweeping the Nation (Cambridge, 2007): Chapter Five.
54. Interview Frau Ziegert, conducted by the author, tape recording, Münster, 29 November 1995.
57. Mouton, From Nurturing the Nation (Cambridge, 2007), 56-60; Robert Proctor, Racial Health: Medicine under the Nazis (Cambridge, 1988), 89-90.
58. Huerkamp, Bildungsbürgerinnen, 310.
60 Interview Frau Kresting, conducted by the author, tape recording, Münster, 3 December 1994.
61. Huerkamp, Bildungsbürgerinnen, 117
64. Interview Frau Rohde, conducted by the author, tape recording, Münster, 21 January 1995 and 15 March 1997.

65. Interview, Frau Kräm er, conducted by the author, tape recording, Detmold, 19 February 1995.


67. Ibid, 137.


70. Weyrather, “Numerus Clausus,” 162.

71. Schacht, Seven Sins, 150-151.

72. Frau Ludwig, Interview conducted by the author, tape recording, Herford, 3 April 1995.


