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WOMEN IN GERMANY, 1925-1940: FAMILY, WELFARE AND WORK. Part II (conclusion)

Social Democratic election poster from the early 1930s, warning of the consequences of a Nazi victory. It was not effective enough. The image was true but inadequate.

Women, the Labour Market and the State in the later 1930s

In the late 1930s the question of women’s work came to pose one of the most intractable and embarrassing sets of problems which the nazi regime faced in internal affairs. The immediate cause of these difficulties was straightforward and obvious — women’s employment was essential to the re-armament programme and the war effort — but their resolution called for measures which were diametrically opposed to the direction of all earlier nazi policies. Attempts to mobilize women for war production also came up against many of the irreducible facts about the nature of women’s work in the capitalist system of that epoch, and they threatened to destroy a large part of the regime’s basis of popular support. The regime found itself impaled upon a set of contradictory imperatives.

From 1936 on the re-armament boom caused an unforeseen and increasingly acute shortage of labour, which rapidly spread to all sectors of the economy — industry, agriculture, services, trade and administration. By the end of 1938 the labour exchanges had 1 million vacancies on their books. It was painfully clear to the government that the some 3·5 million women who neither had children under 14 nor were in regular employment formed the main potential source of additional labour.¹ The labour shortage was critical. It was not only slowing down production, retarding the preparation of war and thus jeopardizing the regime’s fundamental policy of future military expansion. It was also bringing new and dangerous elements of disorder into the social, economic and political system. Workers began to exploit their own scarcity value and employers began to compete with each other for their services; wages rose, productivity and work discipline fell. Production schedules could not be kept to, and stoppages resulting from the labour shortage reduced the efficiency of
industry and raised production costs. The pressure of inflation on both industry and government grew more intense as a result, and, under these accumulating strains, bitter rivalries for power and economic advantage broke out within the complex structures of government, business and administration. The labour shortage was not an isolated economic problem of supply and demand — indirectly, it affected the whole conduct of public life. In losing control over the labour market, the government felt that it was losing control over workers and employers in general and surrendering control over the allocation of economic resources to an increasingly anarchic competitive process. It was both administratively unprepared and, out of fear for its popularity, reluctant to impose comprehensive restrictions on the mobility of workers or on their wages. Unlike the previous crises which the regime had surmounted, this one seemed to be here to stay, indeed certain to get worse as long as the government remained set upon further re-armament for future military conquest. And yet, despite the severity of the crisis, the efforts to mobilize women's labour power were hesitant, half-hearted and relatively unsuccessful.

The extent of the failure to draw upon women's labour in the later 1930s can be presented in fairly exact general terms. It is essential in these calculations to distinguish between changes in the absolute or gross figures, and relative or proportional changes — the latter are normally more significant. In May 1939 there were 1.94 million more women of working age than there had been in 1925, and there were, according to the census, 1.22 million more economically active women. The proportion of women of working age who were in fact economically active rose very slightly in the same period from 48.2% to 49.2%, while the proportion of the adult male population who were economically active fell between 1925 and 1939, because of conscription into the armed forces and the Labour Service. The increase in the proportion of women who did work of one kind or another (aside from housework) was, in the opinion of the statisticians who evaluated the census, partly due to the more accurate counting of family assistants in agriculture — it did not reflect a significant real increase in the mobilization of women's labour power. Of the 12.7 million women who were economically active in 1939, 4.62 million were family assistants: 36.9%. And a further 1.33 million were domestic servants: 16.5%. Insofar as these groups worked in agriculture — and most of them did so — their labour was of great economic importance, even though it was not being efficiently exploited on many of the smaller farms.

In the context of re-armament and preparation for war, however, by far the most important category of economically active women were the wage-earners. Their numbers increased by 278,000 between 1925 and 1939, but this total represented a diminishing proportion of all employed women: 43.5% in 1925, 41.5% in 1939. This category of wage-earners also included a large number whose work was not productive in the narrow sense: for example, there were 820,000 women whose employment — office cleaning etc. — was like that of domestic servants, although they were not classified in this way in economic terms. In order to assess the extent of the mobilization of women for the production of manufactured goods, the decisive figure is that of the number of women workers in industry and handicrafts: in absolute terms, this figure increased between 1925 and 1939 by 127,000, but wage-earning women in
industry and handicrafts accounted for a *diminishing proportion* both of economically active women taken as a whole, and of the total labour force employed in this sector of the economy. This impression of the *relative failure* of the regime to mobilize women's labour is confirmed by the figures concerning the insured labour force, that is, those who were in regular dependent employment. The number of women manual and white-collar workers who were covered by the compulsory sickness insurance scheme — and their work was of greater importance in the efficient preparation of the war than that of the rest of the economically active women — did indeed rise much more rapidly in the later 1930s, than in the first three years of nazi rule.

—from 5·71 million in October 1936 to 7·14 million in July 1939, *but* it still remained significantly below the levels of the later 1920s.

—7·41 million in October 1928.

Since the total number of women of working age increased by some 2 million between 1928 and 1939, the *proportion* of women in *regular* work fell quite markedly — despite the rapidly growing demand for labour in all sectors of the economy after 1936.

These figures point to a number of different questions and conclusions, some of which will be discussed below. At the most general level, however, they reflect directly upon the inadequacy of the scope, scale and type of women's emancipation achieved under the Weimar Republic. While it had been generally accepted that the provision of well-paid, responsible and appropriate employment for women was one of the corner-stones of any emancipatory programme, whether liberal-democratic or socialist, the reforms of the 1920s did not in fact reach beyond the sectors of civil rights and welfare provision: employment, wages, education, vocational training and career structures were left to the uncertain, slow-moving and often contradictory influences of market forces and pressure-group interests, of custom and conventional attitudes. Working conditions did not improve much for women wage-earners, few careers were opened up to women and little was done to ease the lot of women who were both housewives and also held down a job outside the home. Compounded as they were by the adverse effects of violent economic crises, these failures and omissions meant that no general expectation that women could and should have regular and satisfying work was ever established in Germany before 1933. In a wide variety of ways, and for some very good reasons, the role of the housewife really did seem preferable to most women who were not forced by their economic circumstances to seek regular employment in the modern capitalist sectors of the economy — such employment brought few rewards and many additional strains.

Thus the drive for domesticity in the years 1933-1936 had fed on the inadequacies and superficialities of the liberal theory and practice of emancipation. The socio-economic structure had remained largely impervious to liberal reforms in the 1920s: more dramatically and less obviously, the socio-economic structure had also accommodated the early nazi policies *only* where these policies met the needs and aspirations of large numbers of people. The point of the evidence and of this argument, however, is that the emphasis on domesticity, in conjunction with the economic recovery which came with re-armament, really did meet the needs and aspirations (and aversions) of *at least some* of those women who had no wish to work in factories, offices and shops, and run a household as
well. This was probably the ground on which the regime gradually began to win general recognition and support among German women. Whether they had no children or two or six, whether they subscribed to any part of Nazi ideology at all or not, their own experience (reinforced no doubt by the wishes of their husbands) told them that regular work under the prevailing conditions was little more than an unpleasant necessity and that their 'pre-ordained' place in the home was altogether more comfortable. Hitler's injunctions on this point were reassuring, encouraging, but not necessary to the decision. In 1939 there were at least 3·5 million women who had taken this decision to stay at home even though they had no young children. But in the face of the growing labour shortage, the early policies of the regime had to be re-thought.  

In 1936 the National Organization of Industry (Reichsgruppe Industrie) first became seriously anxious about the future supply of labour. It commissioned a detailed investigation of the structure of the industrial labour force which devoted close attention to the employment of women. The picture which emerged was that of female workers eking out a precarious existence in the margins of the economic life of the country, many of them carrying out indispensable tasks which men would not accept, in return for very poor remuneration.  

There was only one partial exception to this generalization: the demand for women white-collar workers (sales and clerical staff) grew steadily in the 1930s, and, in consequence of earlier trade union action to safeguard the employment of men, the salary differentials in jobs open to both men and women were slight. Opportunities for women to be promoted into higher salary groups were, it is true, rare, for they were not generally expected to make a career of their work. Many though by no means all of them were, however, relatively well paid, enjoyed tolerable working conditions and received some vocational training. Employment of this kind was clearly sought after; it was a desirable alternative to the factory and to domestic service. Thus the relatively few complaints about shortages of such women employees came from public authorities, which paid their typists badly — on the whole, supply kept pace with demand and the number of women clerks, typists and sales-girls increased by almost 300,000, over 19%, between 1933 and 1939. The increase was especially marked in industry as the bureaucratization of the larger firms proceeded apace. As in the 1920s, the expansion of non-manual occupations remained the most important single agent of change in the structure of the female labour force. This was the only sector in which the employment of women increased rapidly and steadily throughout the inter-war years, and it accounted for a large part of the total increase in the numbers of working women.  

Women wage-earners were of much greater concern to the National Organization of Industry. In October 1936 only just under 1·5 million women were employed as workers by industrial firms; they amounted to only 13% of the total number of women who were economically active in any manner, and to only 6·1% of the female population of working age (14 to 64 in this case). There were more women non-manual workers than women industrial workers, and about the same number of female domestic servants. Of all women industrial workers roughly two-thirds were employed in the consumer goods industries, only 200,000 in the various branches of the engineering industry, and 90,000 in the
production of electrical goods. Furthermore the overwhelming majority of
women industrial workers were either unskilled (45.3%) or semi-skilled (49.8%);
there were only 71,000 skilled women workers in the whole of industry — only 4.8%
of women industrial workers were skilled, as against 37.5% of the male industrial
labour force. In this respect practically nothing had changed since the 1920s. This
heavy concentration of women in dead-end jobs was only in part a conse-
quence of the production methods peculiar to the textiles, clothing and foodstuffs
industries. It also reflected what was evidently a typical life-cycle for many
working women, derived from mutually reinforcing experiences: on the one hand
there was little attraction in or possibility of making a career out of industrial
work, and on the other hand they would anyway marry in their early or mid-20s,
start a family and become housewives. The age-group which was most heavily
represented in industry was the 18-20 year-olds (17.4% of the female population
of that age in 1936); in 1938 there were as many women wage-earners under
the age of 25 as there were between the ages of 25 and 44. Marriage was not
least an escape route from highly routinized, boring and underpaid labour, and
as long as it appeared in this light to women, employers had little economic
incentive to offer women vocational training facilities and opportunities for
promotion. It was a very vicious circle.

For those women whose husbands' earnings gave them the economic freedom
to choose, the unattractiveness of industrial labour was compounded by very
low rates of pay. In 1939 the weekly pay-packet of a skilled or semi-skilled man
was on average just over twice that of a skilled woman; an unskilled man earned
50% more than an unskilled woman. A number of factors combined to
produce so unequal a distribution of earnings. First, women were concentrated
in industries where wages were anyway low. The domestic market for
consumer goods did not recover from the depression until workers in other
sectors of the economy began to earn high wages again in 1937/38 — until then,
the demand for labour in the consumer goods industries remained slack and wages
stagnated as a result. For women workers the situation was made worse by
widespread short-time in the textile and clothing industries up until 1937,
which was due to shortages of imported raw materials. The real weekly earnings
of many workers in consumer goods industries actually fell from 1933 to 1936.

Second, differentials between the wages of men and women were wide, ranging
in 1939 from 21.5% in the electrical goods industry to well over 40% in the
pottery, glass, printing, clothing and baking trades; the differentials were not
reduced between 1933 and 1936/37. An investigation of this subject by the
Research Institute of the Labour Front reached the conclusion that there was
no rational justification of any kind for so profuse a variety of wide differentials:
they could be accounted for only as the outcome of decades of local trade and
industrial practices. Piece-work was sometimes paid at the same rates for men
and women, and sometimes not. The standard case for differentials was that
a man had to keep a family, while a woman did not. This outlook was reflected
in one of the few detectable regularities within the system of unequal remunera-
tion: the differential was often wider for older than for younger workers doing
the same job — in many trades men began to earn substantially more than women
at the age of 22. One other recurrent feature, both punitive and supremely
hypocritical, was the way in which the differentials tended to be widest in
precisely those trades in which there was least difference between the severity of the work-effort and the unpleasantness of the working conditions of men and women, and narrowest where men's work really was marked off by the heavy character of the tasks performed. This shrewd observation cast doubt on the conventional argument that men were paid more because they did harder work, and pointed to the conclusion, not spelled out in the report, that differentials had considerable symbolic importance and that they constituted a mechanism for influencing the distribution of available work between the sexes. Women's earnings were also kept low by protective restrictions on over-time and night-work — longer hours and the attendant bonuses contributed in considerable measure to the increases in men's earnings after 1936.

These disincentives, inherent in the character of women's industrial work and its remuneration, were not new in the later 1930s, but the social context in which they operated was beginning to change in these years: the material well-being of the majority of working-class households began to improve quite markedly. It seems reasonable to suppose that most married women worked only if they had to. Necessity in this connection is of course culturally and economically determined — prosperity in Germany in 1936/39 did not approach those post-1945 levels, which, by placing expensive consumer durables within the aspirations of working-class households, have provided a major incentive for married women to seek employment. But in the immediate pre-war years, the earnings of men in the boom industries — engineering, mining, some building trades, etc. — did rise to such an extent that many families could meet the customary modest needs of this period out of the one wage-packet. By the summer of 1939 the average weekly earnings of industrial workers were about 30% higher than they had been six years earlier, and were in real terms probably a little higher than they had been in the later 1920s. For skilled men the increases were considerably greater. Improved welfare provisions, in particular the monthly family allowances, reinforced this trend in the working class, where families still tended to be larger than in the middle class.

These formidable obstacles in the way of an intensified mobilization of women were in several respects raised even higher by the consequences of the government's earlier policies. The effects of propaganda about the 'honour attaching to the status of housewife and mother' in actually deterring women from seeking employment were no doubt minimal — there were anyway sufficient practical deterrents. But the rhetoric and practice of welfare does seem to have created expectations on the part of married women that they would be looked after if they were in need. These expectations were not to be disappointed. The government was also faced with the more tangible outcome of its campaign to sell a domestic idyll to the German people. The higher marriage- and birth-rates of the years after 1933 undoubtedly limited the number of women of working age who needed or were in a position to take employment. Contemporaries speculated with great interest as to whether the number of married working women was rising or falling during the later 1930s, for the answer would clearly have thrown interesting light on the validity of the claims which the nazi leaders were making for their family policies. Clifford Kirkpatrick found it impossible to discover conclusive evidence on the issue, and it does indeed seem that no such evidence was published until some preliminary results of the 1939 census
were made available in a little-read technical periodical early in 1941.\textsuperscript{18} If Kirkpatrick was right in supposing that in 1937 the government would have been embarrassed by the publication of any figures showing an increase in the number of married women at work, by 1941 there was a second and contradictory reason for such embarrassment: married women's employment had in fact increased, despite all the propaganda, but the census statistics also showed that the furtherance of marriage and child-bearing had greatly inhibited the mobilization of women's labour. The developments were themselves contradictory.

Between 1933 and 1939 the number of married women in Germany aged between 14 and 65 increased by 1.5 million to 14.9 million, an increase of 11.5%; at the same time the number of married women who were economically active rose by 1 million to just over 5 million, an increase of 24.8%. This was a big change, but the figures also need to be looked at from another angle: if the total number of married women is taken as 100, the proportion of married women who were economically active rose from 29.9% in 1933 to 33.6% in 1939. Put in these terms, the change appears less dramatic, though it is still significant. Now these figures mean no more and no less than that the number of married working women was increasing steadily: they do not in themselves say anything about the \textit{relationship} between the fact of being married and the fact of working. Different calculations must be made in order to establish this relationship.

Common sense suggests that young mothers with small children were less likely to hold down a job in a society which did nothing to help them do so, than unmarried girls or older women, and this was in fact the case. Taken as a whole, the proportion of all women of working age (14–64) who were economically active in Germany rose from 46.9% to 49.2% between 1933 and 1939. For the economically most important age-group, however, \textit{those between 20 and 29} (that is, who were old enough to have gained working experience and a minimum of training but were still young enough to cope with demanding jobs), this proportion fell. It fell only by a small margin, 4.5%, it is true, but it fell at the same time that the corresponding figures for all other age-groups except the over-sixties were rising sharply. And the 20–29 year-olds normally furnished the most important single cohort among women workers.\textsuperscript{19} This fall in the percentage of women aged between 20 and 29 who were economically active, was very largely due to the increased rate of marriage. In 1933 41.6% of this age group as a whole was married, in 1939 56.3% — an extraordinary change. What would have happened if the number of marriages had not increased in this manner? This type of quantifiable what-would-have-happened-if-not . . . question can be answered in hypothetical terms. A crude but suggestive counterfactual conditional calculation shows that, if the marriage rate had remained unchanged from 1933 to 1939, there would have been 722,000 more single women aged between 20 and 29 in the latter year. Almost 90% of single women in this age group were economically active, but only 31.3% of married women: thus, all other things being equal, there would have been 445,000 more women in the labour market in 1939 than there actually were, if the rate of marriage had not increased so sharply. That was roughly twice as many women as were employed as wage-earners in the whole engineering industry.\textsuperscript{20}

The seriousness of this change with respect to the size of the labour force at the disposal of the German economy was enhanced by the fact that the cohort
aged 20 to 24 in 1939 was exceptionally small: these were the women born during the First World War. There were about 1 million fewer of them than there would have been but for the war, a 'loss' of almost one-third of the age-group; there was a similar 'loss' of men of this age. Seen in this light, and in view of the labour requirements of the armaments economy, the increase in the frequency of marriage could not have come at a worse time for the Third Reich.

Before the response of the regime to this dilemma can be discussed however, the above figures must be analysed in class terms, for the relationship between marriage and employment among women varied very widely among the different social classes. In 1939 on average 41.4% of all economically active women were married, but for women civil servants (mainly teachers) the figure was 6.2%, for white-collar workers 11.4%, for wage earners 28.2% and for family assistants 70.1%. This last group was overwhelmingly concentrated in agriculture and the retail trade, so that the total number of married women who worked for a wage or salary in industry, handicrafts and administration was rather small — just over 1.5 million in 1939.21 By far the most typical form of married women's work involved assisting the husband on the farm or in the shop, and women were still much more likely to remain economically active if they married a farmer, publican, artisan or shop-keeper, than if they married a factory worker or a clerk.

The contrast between blue-collar and white-collar families, however, calls for comment. Although the work performed by female white-collar workers was perhaps less difficult to reconcile with the simultaneous burdens of running a home (no shift-work, less physical strain, less difficulty in finding time to do the shopping), a remarkably small number stayed on at their work after they married, or returned to it after they had brought up their children. Only a minute number of married women white-collar workers had dependent children. The behaviour of women manual workers in this respect was very different, for all that their work was in many ways more demanding, and for all that they tended to have more children; it was nearly three times more probable that they would continue in employment after they married. A number of reasons may be tentatively suggested to explain this difference. First, the work done by female white-collar workers was not in itself much more attractive or more interesting than that done by women manual workers; it may have been less tiring, but there were few career opportunities and thus the nature of the work did not give much of a positive incentive for married women to return to their desks or counters. Second, employers probably did not encourage them to do so, for the salaries of white-collar workers rose with age, and there was a plentiful supply of teenagers and of young graduates of typing academies.22 Third, they probably tended to marry husbands whose income was higher than that of the typical husband of a factory girl, and thus there was less economic need for them to continue at work. And their husbands would also be likely to set more store by having a wife who did not work, than would an engineering worker or a tram driver: this was an important question of social status. Finally, it seems possible that all of these different factors converged around the differing family and neighbourhood structures of the manual and the non-manual working population. In order for young working-class mothers to maintain their jobs — and over 500,000 did so in 193323 — it was obviously essential that someone
should look after their children while they were at work. Further research may well show that the availability of grannies and aunts was much greater, the inhibitions against handing over an infant to a friend or neighbour for the day much less strong among the industrial working class than among the aspiring bourgeoisie of the new suburbs and city flats. It is certainly not easy to imagine a female bank-clerk leaving her new town house in Köln-Holweide, Märchenstr., early in the morning with her school-teacher husband, and taking her two-year-old child to the old lady round the corner for the day — and paying her for the service. Yet such scenes must have occurred daily in the working-class quarters of the big textile towns.

Must have . . . . These remarks are necessarily speculative, but the question has a wider importance, for, as the numbers of female white-collar workers grew, so the number of married women normally available to work diminished. White-collar workers were by far the fastest growing group among the female working population in the 1930s, but, paradoxically, they were also being pushed out of economic life at a much faster rate than any other occupational group. They were creating the new type of the house- or flat-bound housewife and mother. In fact, this was the form of domesticity, which National Socialist rule really was encouraging — middle-class, home-centred and indifferent both to the appeal that women should work for the national cause and to the appeal that married women should have large families!

There is a further dimension to this paradox, for it appears that a substantial number of middle- and upper-class women did not wait for the arrival of their first child after marriage before giving up their jobs. There are no statistics on this question, but a rough juxtaposition of the figures on the fertility of marriages in the 1930s with those which categorize the gainfully employed women by marital status and age-group makes it clear that many married women who had no children at all, chose or were persuaded not to work outside the home in any way. Of the women who were married at the time of the 1939 census, 2.2 million had married in 1929 or later and had had no children by their present husband.24 It is certain that not all of them had a job. Thus the 3.5 million women with neither dependent children nor employment who were counted in rapacious hope by the Ministry of Labour in 1939, included not only 50-year-old war-widows and women who looked after the young children of working neighbours and relatives, but also a sizeable number of young, mostly middle-class wives whose life was spent looking after their husbands alone. In September 1941, the Labour Front asserted that many such women, together with well-to-do spinsters and the daughters of rich parents had retreated to Germany’s spas for the duration of the war.25

The encouragement of marriage and of child-bearing, then, was fundamentally at odds with efforts to increase the numbers of working women, and there was indeed a very considerable potential labour reserve among married women in 1938/1939.26 The question was, could the regime mobilize and exploit this labour. The need fast became desperate: by the summer of 1939, before the invasion of Poland, a number of major armaments firms had begun to turn down all new contracts from the armed forces, on the grounds that the labour shortage was so severe that they could not even estimate delivery dates.27

The change in policy on women’s work, such as it was, was not made any
easier by the fact that the people most fully persuaded by nazi propaganda on the domestic role of women and their inferiority to men, were those who peddled it. The official attitude to the competing demands on married women was often one of embarrassed resignation:28

...the state stands helpless before many things. The scornful smile, expressing the sentiments of the childless in regard to the 'stupid' people with large families, cannot be forbidden or restricted. The state cannot completely eliminate the manifold dangers of the large city and it cannot deprive mothers of their employment. At first it can only honour the mothers of children and remove from the fathers of large families part of their extra burden by reducing their tax rates.

This was scarcely a clarion-call to action from a government confident in its approach to the problem! The regime made few practical or propagandistic preparations for the expansion of the female labour force in war industries. There were appeals to young women, but governmental directives on the allocation of labour for the event of war were still cast in the language of discriminatory paternalism, even at the height of the Munich crisis in September 1938, when mobilization seemed only days away:29

...women should not be given work which calls for special presence of mind, powers of decision or a capacity for swift action.
...women should not in general be entrusted with work which calls for special technical competence or knowledge.

As late as 1940 even the well-informed and opportunistic technocrats of the Labour Front's Research Institute dilated at length upon the essentially different nature of 'women's work', upon the fundamental incapacity of women to cope with things technical or to plan a series of work-processes, upon their 'basic indifference to the factory', their lack of 'any inner bond to industrial labour', and upon the alien character which 'not only machines but industrial tools in general' possessed for them.30 These last two texts were not propaganda documents — they record the holders of power talking to each other. Such attitudes influenced policy, at least in a wide variety of acts of omission; even small omissions were important, because the task of persuading large numbers of women to take up employment in industry was anyway so difficult. Short of naked coercion (which was not seriously considered before 1939), the limits of effective governmental intervention in this question were very narrow, for the authorities were now asking some women to make quite fundamental changes in their expectations and in the organization of their own lives and of that of their families: they were asking those who had no pressing need to work, to do so. Even for a ruthless and inhumane dictatorship, this was a major undertaking. Nothing less than a whole-hearted and insistent campaign of propaganda pressure and inducements had any prospect at all of success. Every tergiversation, every ambiguity in the stance of government and party spokesmen was bound to undermine the effort and to reinforce doubts, fears and resentments among the women whom they addressed. There were many such ambiguities and hesitations.

By the same token, any campaign to secure a major increase in the number of women in regular employment needed a long time to take effect; numerous deep-rooted and interlocking resistances had to be worn down. There was in fact no room in National Socialism for the politics of the long haul; the absence of such a middle ground of political practice, a middle ground between dramatic and
brutal improvisation on the one hand and the pursuit of visionary final goals on the other, was one expression of the total irrationality of the social and political system of the Third Reich. In this question, as in all others of similar complexity, time was in practice very short. None of the elite groups had given any serious thought to the matter before mid-1936: industry and government alike had been preoccupied with overcoming unemployment; re-armament was proceeding apace, but it was at this juncture by no means clear that the country’s economic position in the world was secure enough to sustain the limitless expansion of production and employment, which actual preparation for war would entail. A general shortage of labour thus seemed a fairly remote possibility and the regime was content at first to sit back and congratulate itself upon the success of its family policies. When it did come, the problem thus came suddenly, and it very quickly became acute. Meanwhile the momentum of earlier policies remained considerable, not least because they were thought to be popular, and the contemptuous paternalism of the ruling groups also stood in the way of any far-reaching re-appraisal. And then, on the invasion of Poland, a new and decisive dimension of the question emerged: the attitudes of men, whether soldiers or workers, to the enforced employment of their wives in industry.

The positive measures taken to get women into regular work before September 1939 were few and hesitant. Between June 1936 and November 1937 the government gradually whittled away the condition that women receiving marriage loans should give up their jobs; in the end, however, it still discriminated against those who did not do so, since they and their husbands had to pay back the loan at 3% per month rather than 1%. After February 1938 the cost of employing a domestic servant ceased to be a tax-deductable expense for the employer. There were over 1.3 million domestic servants working in private homes in June 1938, 160,000 more than there had been in 1933; nearly all of them were women. It is difficult to reconcile the intention of this reform — indirectly pressing women workers into industrial employment — with the simultaneous introduction, and later extension, of a 'Year of Duty' for young women before they started certain types of regular industrial or office work, for this year was supposed to be spent either in agriculture or in domestic service. The government probably hoped that the scheme would relieve the crushing burden of farmers’ wives — if so, it was disappointed, for the Year of Duty does not seem to have been enforced at all thoroughly: there were a great many exceptions and limitations in the original decrees, and industrialists in the textile and clothing trades were quick to voice their dismay at this threat to their supply of labour. Yet the industrial employers themselves made no serious attempt to improve the technical qualifications of women workers or to build up career structures for them. The number of apprenticeships open to women almost doubled between 1934/36 and 1938/39 but the overwhelming majority of them were for clerical and sales staff.

Wage differentials did become a little narrower in the later 1930s and early 1940s, but on this vital and hotly debated issue the government felt its hands to be tied by the substantial wage increases which had been generally permitted (i.e. mainly to men) up to the invasion of Poland in 1939. These had had a marked inflationary effect, and the purchasing power thus created was sustaining
consumer goods production at an undesirably high level: capital and raw materials, both in short supply in the armaments sector, were going in increasing quantities into the production of consumer durables. Any big general increase in women's rates could only have exacerbated these problems — and nothing less than this would have brought women into industry in large numbers. Thus a formidable new argument was added to the battery of justifications for wide differentials, but it was an argument which deprived the government of any employment policy based on monetary incentives. The Labour Front lent its weight to the cause of wage-increases for women, but the only successes which it could boast about in this connection had nothing to do either with egalitarianism or with an effort to attract women into industry — wage equalization was used by the government in the later 1930s only as a means of deterring employers from using women in some especially heavy jobs in brick-making and pottery, etc. (This did not inhibit the Labour Front from hailing such regulations as victories for its pressure on behalf of women.) And in the shadows of this specious propaganda, extremes of degradation and exploitation persisted in some parts of the country: in 1938 there were still women working in the iron-ware trades in Iserlohn (Westfalia) for starvation wages of 20 pfennig per hour (less than half the average women's wage, less than one-quarter of the average men's wage), and in the Waldenburg area of Silesia women textile workers who earned even less than this were reportedly forced by their poverty into prostitution.

Although wage rates were not generally raised as a means of recruiting women into industry, the Labour Front did meet with some success in its drive to improve the general social conditions of work for women in industry. In the course of the Model Factory Competition between firms for the honour of flying the Golden Flag of the Labour Front (1937 on), considerable emphasis was placed on such matters as medical facilities, rest rooms, the availability of nurses and social workers, additional maternity benefits, extra holidays, etc. Many employers co-operated, not least because of the labour shortage.

All in all, the Labour Front propagated an attitude of extreme protective superiority towards women in industry, portraying them in their advice to managers as fragile, valuable and responsive to personal attention on the one hand, unreliable, feckless and uninterested on the other. According to this diagnosis, the good manager required a superhuman combination of technical and administrative foresight and personal sensitivity in order to induct new women employees successfully and to keep morale high. By making the task of woman-management appear so formidable, the ideologues of the Labour Front both furnished a subtle reinforcement of male superiority and demonstrated their care for the well-being of women.

The real world of industry was, no doubt, very little affected by such programmes, but the activities of the Labour Front after 1936 probably did marginally ease the daily routine of working women, as too did the re-opening of kindergartens, many of which had been closed down during the depression or turned into maternity clinics in the first flush of nazi enthusiasm for domesticity. But the regime could do nothing to lighten decisively the double burden born by all working housewives, and this was acknowledged by the Labour Front. Before 1940 surprisingly few firms experimented with half-shifts or part-weeks
for women workers, and even in the war such arrangements appear to have been rather infrequent, though a number of firms did offer married women regular time off for shopping and housework. (A general introduction of part-time work for women in industry might well have had the consequence of inducing many full-time women workers to go over to part-time work!)

Little time need be lost over the outcome of these non-policies. In October 1938, two years after the original survey had been done, the National Organization of Industry checked up again on the composition of the industrial labour force. While the number of male wage-earners in industrial enterprises had increased in the intervening period by 13.4%, the number of women workers was up by only 11.6% (172,000). A higher proportion of the new recruits than of those employed in October 1936 were unskilled. The overall number of women wage-earners increased a little faster, but the important point was that not many of them were going into large-scale industry as manual workers.40

The anxious inactivity of the regime with respect to this group of women workers threatened to become self-destructive. With respect to another, the largest single group, its activity was marked by callous neglect. German farming became more and more dependent upon female labour during the 1930s. Almost 400,000 men, most of them agricultural labourers, disappeared from the land between 1933 and 1938; this represented a decline of 25% in the number of male wage-earners. The men went off into better paid jobs on building sites or in manufacturing industry — and the women stayed. The number of female agricultural labourers did fall off a little, but this was more than compensated for by an increase of 360,000, over 10%, in the number of women family assistants (though it must be noted that part of this increase was apparent, not real, in that it merely reflected a more careful collection of census data).41 3.83 million women worked on Germany’s farms in this capacity in 1939 — an average of more than one per holding. In 1933 there had been 50,000 more men than women employed in one capacity or another in agriculture; in 1939 there were over 800,000 more women than men. What little is yet known about the lot of these women indicates that it was hard, and that it got progressively worse. In 1939 the labour shortage in agriculture was even more acute than in industry. Small farms could not expand and contract their activities as could business firms — the amount of work to be done remained much the same, regardless of how many people were available to do it — unless, that is, proprietors went over from labour intensive dairy-farming to grain-production, as some were forced to do by the labour shortage; but this was no answer for the small farmers, and it was dairy produce, not grain, which was in especially short supply and had to be imported in large quantities. The increased burden of work fell to a great extent upon the women, especially upon farmers’ wives. In the last 12 months before the invasion of Poland in September 1939 the Reich Food Estate, which controlled all agricultural production, became thoroughly alarmed about this development and circulated to ministers a great deal of evidence, admittedly impressionistic, according to which the strains of over-work were having a drastic effect upon the health of women in the countryside. The number of miscarriages suffered by farmers’ wives was alleged to be increasing rapidly, and the role of farmer’s wife had come to appear so unattractive that the
sons and heirs of small farmers were having great difficulty in finding women willing to marry them: they had to act as housewives, mothers and labourers. Total exhaustion was the only possible outcome.42

The bitter irony of these reports ought not to have escaped those readers who had been so loud in their praise of the healthy attitudes to the family and to child-bearing in the farming community; and yet the government felt itself unable to take effective action. Industry was critically dependent upon the flow of male workers from the countryside, and young men conscripted into the armed forces swelled the ranks of the migrants; attempts to bind farm labourers to their jobs by the force of law had been given up as hopeless in 1936; in the later 1930s the government considered both plans to force those who had recently left the land to return to their old jobs, and plans to replenish the agricultural labour force through civil conscription, but rejected them all on the grounds that they would be too unpopular and thus administratively impracticable.43 And improvements in wages and working conditions on the land, which the Ministry of Agriculture was demanding as an incentive for men to stay there, would have had the supremely unpopular result of raising food-prices in the towns — and were rejected for this reason by Hitler.44 The women on Germany's farms thus had to wait for the arrival of columns of prisoners-of-war and of conscript labourers from the conquered territories of Eastern and Western Europe, before their burden was lightened. Their real social and economic status, as opposed to their legal rights, had been little different from that of those who took over from them. German agriculture was saved from collapse by forced foreign labour.45

Thus through the first phase of the war, 1939-42, the old male-dominated order in industry lived on, unchanged by the growing crisis; the new suburban paternalism of the party tended to keep married women out of regular work, or, failing this, to confine them to appropriately female occupations in the service and administrative sectors; and in the countryside the old patriarchal order reserved to men the right to take advantage of the new possibilities of industrial employment and thus intensified the subservience and exploitation of women.

In 1939 the crisis in industry came to a head. In terms of policymaking, the crisis arose out of two inter-related issues, which pushed the government in diametrically opposed directions; the contradictory arguments were equally compelling. While the armed forces pushed with ever greater vehemence for measures to conscript women who were not working into the war industries, it also became essential to decide upon a policy for the financial support of families, whose breadwinners were to be called up when war commenced. As the military and some senior civil servants realized, the latter issue presented the government with a lever for solving the labour problem: allowances for the wives of soldiers could be introduced at a level so low as to compel many of them to take a job. (A very tentative experiment of this kind was made in the spring of 1939 with the dependents of men drafted to armaments firms away from their homes, but it was dropped after a few months.) In the first instance this approach was decisively rejected. Many of the details of this controversy are still obscure, but it is clear that fears about the effects of such a scheme on the morale of the troops in the field were a predominant consideration — more important than the often cited ideological purism of Hitler on questions relating to motherhood and
the protection of women. In the event, the separation allowances for the wives of soldiers were set at a maximum of 85% of the husbands' previous earnings, a very high level, higher than in any other country during World War II. (In only one respect was the government inhibited in its generosity, and here the demands of budgetary economy were at odds with the needs of industry: wives who were already working received a much lower allowance! — they expressed their indignation at so unjust and so discouraging a ruling by working less and less well. The government raised their allowance in May 1940.)

This solution to the problem of maintenance, the propaganda value of which the government exploited to the full, played no small part in producing a catastrophic situation in the labour market during the winter of 1939/40. The imminence of war anyway induced more people to get married, but it is probable that the separation allowances accentuated this trend. In 1939 130,000 more couples were married than in 1938 — 774,200 in all, the highest figure ever! The number of women in insured employment declined from July 1939 to March 1940 by 540,000 (6.3%); this fall was far greater than the seasonal average, it started earlier and lasted longer than the normal seasonal swing, and it was due only in small part to new war-time restrictions upon the consumer goods industries, for these restrictions were slight and ineffectual during 1940. The military authorities were in no doubt that the separation allowances had induced many women to marry and give up their work. The conjunction of this development with the conscription of numerous men from industry into the armed forces placed war production in extreme jeopardy. By February 1940 armaments plants alone, strictly defined, were short of 250,000 workers according to an authoritative estimate. The forces' reserves of munitions were so low that military aggression in the months after the fall of Poland (October-December 1939) was completely out of the question — yet Hitler was pressing for an immediate invasion of France. This problem was sufficiently acute for the head of the War Economy Staff himself, Thomas, a top-ranking general, to take part in a search for 300 additional women munitions workers in Berlin. He noted in February 1940 that 'the labour shortage has become the crucial issue of the war'.

Women who did not work and had no young children were the only large and immediately accessible reserve of labour. And by this stage nothing less than methods of compulsion would get them quickly into industry; in the view of General Thomas, cutting the separation allowances would no longer suffice. But industry was ill-prepared for an influx of women workers, particularly if they were to be reluctant conscripts rather than eager volunteers. Even those firms where they were already employed in large numbers made, it seems, little allowance for the severity of war-time conditions; and many women workers responded to black-outs, rationing, shortages, queues and, in some cases, the burden of running a household alone, by taking time off without permission. There were many complaints in the winter of 1939/40 about absenteeism and declining work-discipline among both men and women in industry, but women were thought to be especially unreliable. Morale and productivity fell off especially among those women who had not given up their jobs although their husbands had been called up, and who thus forfeited a part of the separation allowance; and married women whose husbands were on good wages had long been counted among the least enthusiastic and least reliable members of the
industrial labour force. This indifference to the pressing needs of the war effort furnished a further occasion for the regime to exhibit its dedication to double standards in the treatment of men and women: after the invasion of Poland, men who repeatedly breached the rules of industrial discipline were handed over in increasing numbers to the Gestapo, which incarcerated them for short periods in concentration or labour camps; but women 'offenders' were not considered to have the same degree of responsibility for their actions (or were perhaps thought not to need such stern measures of deterrence) and customarily got off with a warning.49

Despite these difficulties the government had no option but to press on with plans for a measure of conscription of women. This was done with the utmost reluctance, and represented by and large a capitulation on the part of the civilian ministries to the urgent demands of the military. The Minister of Labour had foreseen both the need for and the unpopularity of this policy as early as July 1938, and had laid down at the time of the invasion of Poland that women were not to be conscripted into industry.50 In the face of the extreme shortages of the winter of 1939/40 this position could no longer be maintained. Top level discussions about the number of women workers needed and about the details of a conscription scheme began in earnest in February 1940. By the end of April, a consensus was emerging in favour of the Ministry of Labour's plan to restrict the victims, in the first instance, to women aged between 14 and 40 who were no longer at school or university and who had no small children; but the talks dragged on through May without a firm decision. The Minister of the Interior could not deny that there was an emergency, but he was very worried about the effects of conscripting women on 'the mood both within Germany and on the fighting front'; he insisted that 14 and 15 year-olds be left out of the scheme entirely. All of the ministries concerned were perplexed by the problem of the soldiers' wives who had given up regular employment since September 1939 and were living on their separation allowances. On 16 May 1940 the High Command of the Armed Forces peremptorily demanded that these women be compelled to return to work; its spokesman asserted that unless such a clause were included, the Minister of Labour's draft decree would not be adequate to the crisis in the armaments industry, and one Gauleiter intervened to suggest that they be allowed to receive their allowances in full, on top of their wages, if they returned to work.

It was all in vain. On 4 June 1940, over a fortnight before France capitulated, Göring announced that he was not going to sign any such decree: this step would cause 'far too much unrest among the population at the moment', and there would anyway be sufficient prisoners-of-war to meet Germany's manpower needs, without the government having to drag women out of their homes!51 The history of the Second World War contains many illustrations of the element of social imperialism in nazi policies, but few as clear as this.

The matter did not end there; for, despite the plunder of labour from occupied territories, acute shortages arose repeatedly throughout the war, and on each occasion the demand for the conscription of women was raised again. In 1941 it was rejected twice by Hitler, and he did not give way until January 1943, when the Red Army began to move on to the offensive. Women aged between 17 and 45 were then required to register so that the authorities could check whether
their family responsibilities allowed them to be drafted into war work of one kind or another. In the first few months this decree seems to have been enforced with some vigour, but momentum soon lapsed as women conscripts proved themselves adept at fulfilling conditions for exemption. By December 1943 Speer's Armaments Ministry was again in despair: 'We must record a total failure to mobilize German women for work in the war effort'.

The main reason for this hesitancy was not of an ideological order, but was rooted in the well-founded fear that civil conscription for women would be extremely unpopular, both with women and with men. The eugenic argument against forcing women to work — that it would weaken the racial stock, slow down population growth, cause miscarriages, disrupt the delicate balance of male supremacy — was, it seems, merely a piece of ritualistic rhetoric, behind which embarrassing domestic political considerations arising out of the weakness of the regime and its fear of the people, could conveniently be hidden. When for example, Sauckel, the new head of the labour administration, was forced to announce on 20 April 1942 that Hitler had yet again refused to permit the conscription of women, he ran through all the eugenic clichés and then, adopting Hitler's standpoint as his own, significantly added, 'I cannot enumerate all the reasons which have made me come to this decision'. He went on, following Göring's line, to invoke a barbaric utopia, in which Germany's ultimate victory in the war would give her control over such large numbers of foreign workers that 'we shall be in a position to remove all women and girls from jobs regarded as unsuitable for women'. Meanwhile the utopia had to be partially anticipated, for the regime thought that it was a very popular programme, good for morale. Many sections of the party organisation, which was, in the view of the Gauleiters, responsible to the Führer for the mood of the population, considered the conscription of women into industry to be quite out of the question; the most that should be done was to use the party and the propaganda machine to ask for volunteers. Not until 1941 did the number of women in regular employment exceed the figure for 1928. At least until 1943 many women enjoyed a relatively protected position in the war-time social and economic system. It must have seemed to them — and to their boy-friends, husbands, fathers — that they had something to thank the regime for. The mobilization of women for war production remained much less efficient in Germany than in Britain, and British policies were often held up as an example and a warning by those nazi leaders who were prepared to risk the enforcement of stronger measures.

A comparison with Britain is instructive at this point. The increase in the number of jobs available, combined with a government campaign to persuade women to volunteer for war work, led to a 10% increase in the number of women in regular employment in the United Kingdom between June 1939 and June 1940; in Germany the number fell during this period. By the spring of 1941 it was clear beyond all doubt that an enormous manpower shortage would develop within 12 months, both in industry and in the armed forces. The compulsory registration of women was introduced in March 1941 and, on the basis of the register, women were selectively conscripted into industry, the administration and the armed forces from December 1941 on. These decisions were resisted at the highest level by Conservative members of the government and the civil service, including Churchill himself, on the ground that they would
be bad for the morale of men, but the Minister of Labour, the trade unionist Ernest Bevin, successfully insisted that the measures were necessary and practicable, and that they would not be bad for morale. The similarity with the debate in Germany is striking, but the outcome was quite different. In Bevin’s view it was so different because the people in general and the working class in particular trusted him and recognized the strength of the Labour representatives in the Cabinet; they accepted the legitimacy of the parliamentary system and accepted the defensive goals for which the war was being fought at this time. The Conservative opponents of the conscription of women could not, for their part, deny the urgent need of the armaments industry for more labour. On every single one of these counts, the position of the nazi government was weaker. Bevin also set great store by the efforts to secure the voluntary enlistment of women before December 1941, so that he could claim that compulsion was only introduced when the need for labour could no longer possibly be met by the number of volunteers — the population had thus been prepared for the measure. And after December 1941, compulsion was used only to reinforce and guide voluntary enlistment: by May 1942 15 women had been gaoled for refusing to do work allocated to them, no more, but no less. Conscription was confined at first to young women, but soon extended so that, ‘by 1943 it was almost impossible for a woman under forty to avoid war work unless she had heavy family responsibilities or was looking after a war worker billeted on her’. Between September 1939 and May 1942 the number of women working in industry alone increased by over 1.1 million, and it went on rising throughout the war; in September 1943, all women aged under 51 were required to register; by December 1943 there were 1.5 million women in the engineering industry, 1.46 million more than in 1939! In practice the conscription of women raised very few political or industrial problems, and there was very little popular resentment or resistance. Employers were forced to go in for factory welfare schemes and scientific management on a large scale, in order to hold on to their new female labour force and secure high rates of productivity. The most bitter resistance came from a few groups of skilled male workers who wished to defend their jobs and the status of their trades.

No conclusion can be more than suggestive. The nazi regime consistently attached a peculiar importance to family, domesticity and child-bearing. The political leaders did not, to be sure, consider this as a separate autonomous sphere in their policy-making, and the goals of their family policies were anything but ends in themselves: the removal of women from political life and the attempts to restrict their employment were an integral part of the general attack on liberalism, and in the eyes of the ideologues the raising of the birth-rate had an important place in the strategy for the racial supremacy of the Germanic people. Further, if the cost of the welfare reforms in the interests of large families is set against armaments expenditure, the reforms appear positively mean, even trivial. Housing needs were almost totally neglected. And, as the promiscuity of the political leaders became public knowledge, as the divorce rate steadily rose, as children were encouraged to inform on the political attitudes of their parents,
as the demands of the armaments drive forced more and more male workers to live away from home for long periods of the year, and as unmarried women began to get official encouragement to bear illegitimate children, so the official shining ideal of the integrated, stable and prolific family began to look more and more like a monstrous deception. Yet it would be a serious mistake, even in the light of these important facts, to dismiss the family policies of the regime as so much manipulative verbiage and gesture.

For these policies do seem to have had a considerable resonance; if they had not, it would be hard to account for the consistent concern of the leadership with them. Hitler and his civilian advisers thought that the German people were particularly sensitive to political and economic impositions on married women and the family. At their inception, the family policies of the regime may indeed have been strongly influenced by extreme, irrational and impractical fantasies of a eugenic and racialist order, which could never be of more than sectarian appeal. But it can perhaps be argued that their import was very much wider, because they addressed themselves, almost by accident, to some general and deeply felt needs engendered by the social order of modern industrial capitalism: 'almost by accident', because the success of the policies lay not in persuading more married couples to have large numbers of children and all mothers to stay at home, but in persuading (or more exactly, assisting) more people to marry, to have no children or one or two, and in reinforcing the distinction between men's and women's spheres of responsibility.

In the era of the large-scale organization of industry, services and administration, the family household has been deprived of most of its original functions as a unit of property ownership and production, and its economic role is to an increasing extent defined in terms of the organization of consumption. (In this context the small family household is certainly indispensable to business interests, precisely because it is outstandingly inefficient and wasteful.) Some of the older welfare and educational functions of the family have also either lapsed or been taken on by public authorities. And the moral foundations of its claim to be the primary social institution are beginning to be questioned and undermined in a wide variety of ways. Whatever its utility to the economic structure of capitalism, the family may be on the way to becoming an anachronism. But until very recently the increasing industrialization and bureaucratization of economic and public life has gone hand in hand with a steady growth in the popularity of marriage and of the separate family household as private institutions. For the period under consideration, it is probably more appropriate to think of this modern form of domesticity as a specific reaction to industrialization and bureaucratization, than as just another example of the persistence of anachronistic forms of social organization in advanced industrial capitalism. In the first half of the 20th century, the small closed family unit is not a remnant of a by-gone peasant/artisan economy, but in many important respects a novelty with its own distinct history.

The evidence that can be offered for this suggestion is sketchy in the extreme, and I am aware that there is a good deal of work on the subject with which I am not familiar. However: the conventions customarily used to describe public life on the one hand (politics, administration, work) and family life on the other, form sets of polar opposites. According to these conventions, the public sphere
is cold, impersonal, competitive, insecure and often arbitrary or opaque, usually enormous in scale, demanding, geared to efficiency and, perhaps above all, tending to reduce the person through the progressive division of labour to a function, so that work becomes instrumental. In popular imagery the family is both the compensation and the justification for this anxious and alienated toil, both the refuge from the compulsions of work and the unquestionable good for the sake of which the public sphere is endured: the family is warm and supportive, individual, intimate and secure, it encompasses the whole person and is small and manageable — motives are rewarded, not just performance. (That these conventions themselves constitute a distorting ideology is less important in the present context than the fact that they are very widespread.) In this most bourgeois of bourgeois ideologies, the boundary between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom is not a distant and difficult future divide between historical epochs, but a line across which people believe that they commute daily.60

It can perhaps be argued that the romantic nostalgias and the eugenic fantasies of the nazi movement led the regime to tumble upon the immense potential of this dichotomy. In extolling the virtues and the importance of the private sphere, of family life, the nazi leadership was not just engaged in a cynical trick to distract people’s attention away from politics and to underpin legal disenfranchisement with a psychological self-disenfranchisement — though they were certainly trying to do this too. Whether they realized it or not, their propaganda and their policies magnified the much more fundamental reconciliatory function of family life, and people were responsive to this because the campaign spoke to long-established and almost universal mechanisms of self-protection against the alienated rigours of life outside the home. If this speculation is well-founded, then we have to do with a ‘higher cynicism’, embedded in the structure of modern industrial and bureaucratized societies, and articulated only in a peculiarly extreme form by National Socialism: for the more intense the economic and political pressures became in the 1930s, the greater the exploitation of labour and the concentration of capital, the more arbitrary, inaccessible and incomprehensible the sources of public power — the more important was the reconciliatory function of the family.

The nightmare world of dictatorial government, huge industrial combines, all-encompassing administration and organized inhumanity was parasitic upon its ideological antithesis, the minute community of parents and children. The regime propagated both elements of this pseudo-contradiction simultaneously, with great energy and, perhaps, to considerable effect.61 Women may have been more open than men to the blandishments of such a policy, not only because they were normally responsible for house and home, but also because the public roles and the types of work which were available to them were so very restricted. Men benefited, not only in that their masculine pride was flattered and their protective instincts encouraged, but also directly: for it was, as Hitler indicated at Nuremberg in September 1934, nice, comforting, relaxing and reassuring to return from the brutal struggle for survival, wealth, land and power, to return from murder and carnage, to the enclosed warmth of a supportive family: ‘... the big world rests upon this small world! The big world cannot survive if the small world is not secure.’62
Postscript

One of the ways in which historians characteristically keep their readers at a distance is by leaving only the most discreet and delphic clues as to the position which any one piece of their work occupies in relation to their past and future writing. Impersonality is one of the costumes worn by authority, and it is in the same spirit and with the same results that historians are reluctant to draw attention to what they regard as the weaknesses of their own work. In this journal we hope to break down conventions of mystifying reticence. While the subject of enquiry will always remain more important than the writer, some articles may be made more intelligible if the author tries to place them and discusses briefly the main problems faced in writing them.

I resisted for a long time the idea that it was possible or necessary to investigate the position of women in society as an undertaking distinct from any other form of social historical enquiry. I was bemused and depressed by the scholasticism of much methodological left-wing writing on the subject, which elaborates with impeccable logic the necessary relationships between production and reproduction and vice-versa, but which never promises to reach any goal beyond unimpeachable definitions, and of course does not reach that non-existent goal either — militancy congests into clamorous categories, producing works which might be the offspring of a proud union between a prayer-wheel and a sausage-machine. More important, however, was the difficulty which I experienced in deciding what the enquiry could really be about, if it were not to be of a general theoretical kind. Historians are brought up and accustom themselves to write about people's actions, that is, about the people who acted in public. By this criterion women were barely present on the historical stage in Nazi Germany; individually they played little role in politics after their — admittedly incomplete — expulsion from public life in 1933; and collectively their active presence was very hard to discern except when the women's organizations of the party were carrying out one propaganda campaign or another.

What was there to write about? There was something to be said on the subject of the policies of the regime towards women, but this would not amount to a discussion of the position of women of a kind similar to that which could be written about peasant farmers, who lost their labourers and complained about prices; or workers, who refused to do overtime; or Jews, who organized (or collaborated) in response to persecution. Women were not a collectivity in this sense. Women workers were paid less well and were concentrated in certain industries, and the number of women clerks and typists was increasing, but this was much the same in all Western European countries, and appeared almost self-evident. Part of the problem arose from the fact that Germany in these years was a male-dominated society, which meant that it was men who decided what the important political issues were and who wrote most of the documents on which research has to be based, but this second-hand bias and indifference was far from being the whole reason why women appeared not to be doing things in the manner in which historians customarily expect the subjects of their research to make their presence felt. The relative subjection of women really did manifest itself in a lesser degree of activity in this sense.
This issue thus raised a more fundamental question of historical method, a question about the presuppositions of a discipline which is still narrative in its basic structure, and thus emphasizes and revolves around activity of any kind. (This is as true of much socialist writing about working-class movements, as it is of liberal or conservative writing on political and economic history.) The question can be resolved in a variety of ways. It would certainly be possible and desirable to find out a great deal more about the non- or semi-public actions of women in Germany during the inter-war years than I (or any other historian) have yet done, and to construct a densely documented picture of the way in which at least some women lived in the 1920s and 1930s. It would be a very laborious piece of research which I did not want to undertake, and I am not certain at the end how much light it would actually shed on the main developments and crises of the period — the rise of Nazism, the consolidation of the Third Reich, the Second World War; I did not want to lose sight of these points of reference.

A second possible resolution of the problem, revisionist rather than innovatory, gradually forced itself on to my attention as a result of looking again at the materials which I had already gathered together. It became clear that practically all historians who have written about Germany in this period had simply taken the family and the division of roles between the sexes for granted, and had written about the men who did act publicly without examining this essential context of their public behaviour, much as the men they were writing about usually took it for granted too. Thus as the article developed, it became more and more clear that the study of the non-actors provided an exceptionally fruitful new vantage point from which the behaviour of the actors could be — indeed, had to be — reinterpreted. By setting their actions in this broader factual framework (for it is not in the first instance a question of a new theoretical approach), hitherto neglected aspects of the policies of the regime took on a new significance and old questions about its durability gained a wide new dimension. It was possible to come a lot nearer to seeing things in the round. Even an unsuccessful or incomplete attempt to study those who had no voice and who, for the most part, suffered passively, can throw the actions of those with property, power and an easy hold on the historian’s ear into much sharper relief. What was surprising was the time and difficulty it had cost to break the tyranny of the foreground actors over my historical perspective. They had seemed so self-evidently more important.

This is, of course, by no means the only resolution to the problem of method posed by writing about women, but I think it does bring out one of the major difficulties, and indicates one of the major rewards to be gained. In order to begin with this approach it was necessary to make some concessions to a different type of resolution of the problem. The methodologically least complicated way of writing about people in the past who appear to have been largely passive in public affairs, is to assume and emphasize their passivity by subjecting them as far as the source materials allow to entirely impersonal analysis — birth- and death-rates, nutrition, land tenure, income, social stratification, migration, legal controls, etc. Valuable though all such sociological data is, it cannot on its own do much to enhance our understanding of the past; it has to be organized around a discussion of the relations of the group in question with other groups in society and with the state.
These are the main reasons why this paper is shaped as it is. And they are also among the reasons why I do not intend to do any further detailed research into the position of women in Nazi Germany in the near future; I want to go back to finishing a book about the German working class during this period. It will be a different book from the one which I would have written if I had not done this work, and I hope a better one.

Concentration upon those aspects of the position of women and of policies towards women which shed most light upon the general character of the nazi regime has its own numerous drawbacks, and these account for some of the weaknesses of this article. Most of these weaknesses reflect my lack of detailed knowledge about the everyday life of women. The article is very thin on relationships within the family, a subject which the techniques of oral history could open up. Its silence on prostitution and on unmarried mothers bears witness to my ignorance about these subjects, not to a belief that they were unimportant or are uninteresting. It seems in general difficult to avoid being either anecdotal or wildly speculative in writing about sexual relations between men and women in this period, and here too I have preferred to remain silent. My reticence in using the categories of social psychology has rather different reasons, for some very interesting work is being done in this field. But active Nazis were mainly men and so the experts write mainly on male psychology; furthermore, I have a simple-minded belief that these explanatory categories should be used only when other types of account manifestly fail to do justice to a subject — that is, when more mundane explanations simply do not match the extreme character of the behaviour under discussion. By implication I have suggested in this article that one can get a long way with mundane explanations. I fully expect to be proved wrong.

Perhaps more serious is the amateur quality of my forays into demography. I do not think that I have mistaken the essential lines of change in population and family structure, but in this complex and fascinating discipline important points of interpretation can hang upon seemingly minor and technical questions regarding the statistics and the calculations done with them. I wish I were more confident, and can only draw small consolation from a recent remark of Germany’s leading historical demographer: ‘The demographic history of the Weimar Republic has hardly been studied hitherto.’ A great deal of work remains to be done on all these aspects of the subject of this article.
GUIDE TO ABBREVIATIONS AND REFERENCES

In the footnotes below, works and sources referred to only once or twice are cited in full on the first occasion. Those referred to frequently are abbreviated throughout as follows:

1. Unpublished Documents, West German Federal Archives
   BA Koblenz, R 41—Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Ministry of Labour files.
   BA Koblenz, R 43 II—Reich Chancellery files (new series).
   BA/MA Freiburg, WiIF5—Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau (Military Department of the West German Federal Archives), files of the War Economy Staff of the High Command of the Armed Forces.

2. Books, Theses and Articles
   PRELLER, Sozialpolitik—Ludwig PRELLER, Sozialpolitik in der Weimarer Republik, Stuttgart 1949.
   RGBl—Reichsgesetzblatt (German Statute Book, annual).
   SdR—Statistik des Deutschen Reichs, herausgegeben vom Statistischen Reichsamt. (Comprehensive series of detailed official statistical publications.)

2 I have discussed these issues in detail in my thesis; for a brief sketch see 'Labour in the Third Reich 1933-1939', Past and Present, no. 33, April 1966.
3 These and the following statistics are taken or computed from Stat. Hdb., pp. 32 f.; Wirtschaft und Statistik, 1941, no. 3. Girls working in the Labour Service are not included in these and the subsequent figures. There were about 50,000 of them in 1939. I am grateful to Jill Stephenson for this point.
4 For the categories used in the censuses and by the social insurance authorities, 'economically active', 'worker' etc., see Part I of this article, History Workshop, no. 1, Spring 1975, p. 78. To put it differently, the total number of economically active women increased by 10-6% between 1925 and 1939, while the number of female wage-earners rose by only 5.6%. All of these percentages are slightly distorted by the more complete counting of family assistants in the 1939 census.
5 In the economic census category 'domestic service' there were 1·33 million women, but in the occupational category 'domestic servants and related types of work' 2·15 million women were counted: Stat. Hdb., p. 32; Stat. Jhb. 1939-40, p. 376.
6 Stat. Hdb., p. 474. The insurance categories were changed again after 1928, but not, it appears, to a degree which rules out direct comparisons between the years.
7 In addition to the important perspective opened up by Bridenthal, 'Weimar Women',

This very detailed report was never published. Typescript entitled 'Die Facharbeiter- und Nachwuchsfraje in der Industrie'; BA/MA Freiburg, WiF5, file 1917.

Stat. Hdb., p. 32; Arbeitswissenschaftliches Institut der DAF, 'Beiträge zur Beurteilung des Frauenlohns'; typescript 1938, copy in Deutsches Zentralarchiv Potsdam, German Democratic Republic.
The number of women civil servants fell a little between 1933 and 1939.

This enquiry covered only firms which were members of the National Organization; it did not cover craft enterprises, domestic out-work etc. A comparison with the 1939 census suggests that there were a further 500,000 or more women engaged in manufacturing production outside the larger firms which reported in 1936. The same applies to male industrial wage-earners: the National Organization counted 5-45 million in 1936, the census recorded 8-74 million in 1939, by which time, of course, employment levels were anyway higher.

This section of the 1936 report can be compared with Preller, Sozialpolitik, p. 118.

The first of these figures is taken from the report 'Facharbeiter- und Nachwuchsfraje' (see note 9 above), and is unsatisfactory in that no separate calculation was made for the age-group 20-24. It is in no way clear in which the proportion of women industrial workers among the whole female population was probably higher than that of those aged 18-20. It is supplemented by figures for all women wage-earners, derived from a census carried out by the labour exchanges in 1938: Stat. Hdb. 1939-40, pp. 376 f.

Earnings statistics: Stat. Hdb., pp. 496 ff.; Mason, Arbeiterklaesse (Appendix II), and thesis, Ch. IVb; Gerhard Bry, Wages in Germany, 1871-1945, Princeton 1960, pp. 242 f. Earnings in the consumer goods industries did increase quite rapidly after 1936, but the 1939 figures only serve to emphasize the enormity of the gulf before they began to rise.

Unskilled women in other branches of industry earned on average more than semi-skilled women in the distinctively 'women's industries'.

For these and the following points, see Arbeitswiss. Inst. der DAF, 'Beiträge'; Bry, Wages, p. 248. The differentials are calculated on the basis of hourly wage rates (not earnings) and the women's rate is expressed as a percentage of the men's rate.

Kirkpatrick, Women and Family Life, p. 205, quotes impressive sources on the overwhelming importance of family poverty and economic need in motivating women to take regular employment. It is very difficult to calculate accurate figures for real earnings in this period, since the statistics worked out at the time are defective and incomplete. There are quite good figures on money wages for the period from December 1935; according to them the average earnings of skilled and semi-skilled male workers in industry rose by 19% between then and June 1939; Bry, Wages, p. 243. See also note 14 above.

For welfare reforms and family allowances, see Part I of this article, in History Workshop, no. 1, Spring 1976, esp. pp. 96 ff.

Wirtschaft und Statistik, 1941, no. 3; the following calculations are based on this source. Kirkpatrick, Women and Family Life, pp. 204, 227 ff. It is noteworthy that the otherwise detailed and comprehensive publication of the Ministry of Labour, Schutz der werktätigen Frau, Berlin 1941, gave no figures for married women workers and failed to discuss their particular difficulties in combining the two roles, although these issues were of decisive importance for any new wartime labour policy.

To be precise, in May 1939, 21.6% of all economically active women were aged between 14 and 19, 21.8% between 20 and 29—thus the younger age-group was numerically more important. However, in this year the cohort aged between 20 and 29 was unusually small on account of the low birth-rate in the First World War; and teenage girls normally had economically less important occupations than young women, on account of their relative lack of experience and physical strength. The decline in the proportion of economically active among the over-sixties was very marked and would bear further investigation. It can probably be interpreted as evidence of gradually rising living standards.

This figure is reached by subtracting 10% from the 722,000 women who would have been single in 1939 if only 41.6% of the age-group had been married, in order to cover those who did not work anyway; and then subtracting 31.3% to take account of the fact that this proportion of the women who did marry continued to be economically active. The marriage rate among women of this age in 1933 was, of course, unusually low, on account of the economic crisis. It is interesting that the position in respect of the age-group 30 to 39 was quite different; the increase in the marriage rate in this case went hand in hand with a marked increase in the proportion of economically active women. In this context, widows and divorcees are classified as single women.
These figures are not strictly comparable with those for 1933, since they refer to the population within the boundaries of May 1939, that is, including Austria and the Sudeten German area ('Greater Germany'): SdR, vol. 556/2, pp. 2 ff.

It is also possible that the anti-feminist reaction among the salaried middle class persisted after the later 1930s, and that it was still made difficult for married women employees to retain their posts. I have no evidence on this point yet. On the position in the early 1930s, see Part I of this article, History Workshop, no. 1, Spring 1976, pp. 88 ff.


Present husband is an important qualification, since the marriage and family statistics take no account of children brought by their mothers (or fathers) into second marriages. In 1939 nearly 90,000 women married for the second time ('Greater Germany'): Stat. Jhb. 1941/42, p. 72.

Childlessness varied markedly with social class. In 1933, 16.4% of families headed by self-employed men, 19.5% of families headed by workers and 28.6% of families headed by white-collar workers were childless: SdR, vol. 470/1, p. 14. On the flight to the spas, which were not priority targets for allied bombers, see Ley to Reich Chancellery, 10 Sept. 1941: BA Koblenz, R 43 II, file 652.

There was also a considerable reserve among domestic servants, insofar as they were not employed in farmers' households. I have not been able to find statistics on the employers of domestic servants.

Mason, thesis, ch. VId.


DAF, Deutsche Sozialpolitik 1936-37, pp. 60 f.; 1938, p. 181. On the form and purpose of marriage loans, see Part I of this article, History Workshop, no. 1, pp. 95 ff.

See note 6 above. During the war these women were to a large extent replaced by conscripts from the German-occupied territories.

See Stephenson, thesis, pp. 168-72; Mason, thesis, pp. 616 f. It is possible that the government hoped that girls doing their 'Year of Duty' would replace older women, pushed out of domestic service by the new tax legislation. For further details, see Wunderlich, Farm Labor, pp. 329 ff.

Stat. Hdb. p. 482. 72% of the apprenticeships for women were in white-collar occupations, the rest mainly in the textiles and clothing industries.

For details see Bry, Wages, p. 248; Mason, thesis ch. VIIIa and c.

DAF, Deutsche Sozialpolitik 1938, pp. 51 f., 120-3.


See Mason, 'Labour in the Third Reich', Past and Present, no. 33; Kirkpatrick, Women and Family Life, pp. 222 f.; DAF, Deutsche Sozialpolitik 1938, p. 51. I am grateful to Dr. Wunderlich-Schumann for further information on this point.

Arbeitswiss. Inst. der DAF, Jahrbuch 1940/41, vol. I, pp. 373-6, waxed especially eloquent on these themes.

Supplement to report 'Facharbeiter- und Nachwuchsfrage', BA/MA Freiburg, WiIF5, file 1917.

For these and subsequent statistics, see Wirtschaft und Statistik, 1941, no. 3; Stat. Jhb. 1939/40, p. 379; Stat. Hdb., pp. 32, 84 f. There were a further 340,000 part-time women family assistants. The number of male family assistants fell sharply after 1933. This whole trend marked a reversal of that of the 1920s, when women were leaving the land at a faster rate than men. Wunderlich, Farm Labor, pp. 297-301, gives a good description of the flight from the land.

See the numerous reports and proposals, some of them sent by Minister Darré personally to Hitler during 1938 and 1939: BA Koblenz, R 43 II, file 213b, 611; also reports by the Trustees of Labour, reprinted in Mason, Arbeiterklasse; and Wunderlich, Farm Labor, pp. 299, 322 f.


See note 42 above.


Source materials: BA/MA Freiburg, WiIF5, file 319, 420/1, 420/2; and WO8, file 110/8. BA Koblenz, R 41, file 161; and R 43 II, file 648. Wunderlich, Farm Labor, p. 323.

Stat. Hdb., pp. 47, 474. Jill Stephenson points out that a temporary relaxation in the eugenics regulations played a part in the increase in the number of marriages.


In addition to the analysis by Eichholtz, *Geschichte*, ch. IIId, see the full collection of papers on these deliberations, 1940-41, in: BA Koblenz, R 43 II, file 652. These are quoted above and drawn upon for the following paragraph. After June 1941 women who received allowances and had no dependants were interviewed and asked to return to work; if they refused without reason, they were threatened with conscription under the terms of an unpublished (1) decree. Well over 80% found good reasons for refusing.


Internal. Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, doc. 016-PS (Trial of the Major War Criminals...), vol. xxv, Nuremberg 1947, p. 63. See also Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham (eds.), *Documents on Nazism 1919-1945*, London 1974, pp. 647 ff. Petzina, Janssen and most other authors attribute the failure of the regime to force more women into industrial employment entirely to Hitler's ideological preconceptions. I find this account wholly unconvincing. The sources make it quite clear that much bigger issues were at stake, and the vacillation of the government on this question was all of a piece with its attempt to bribe the German people into passivity on other major questions of social policy.


The reform of the marriage laws in 1938 led to an immediate increase in the divorce rate of over 20%: *Stat. Jb. 1941/42*, p. 92 f. (Divorced women always found it much harder to re-marry than divorced men.) The legal and financial position of single mothers was improved in the later 1930s. The ascetic element in the sexual morality of National Socialism was institutionalized in the war years through the building of 'B-Barracks', in which women from the occupied-territories served the males of the master race as prostitutes: BA Koblenz, R 43 II, file 1186; R 41, file 69.

I have dealt only obliquely with the question, much discussed by socialists and feminists, of the appropriateness of modern family organization to industrial capitalism, because I am not yet at all clear what the issues in this discussion are. It is particularly unclear to me, by what specific means industry has suggested, required, enforced on an almost universal scale this form of family organization, which appears to suit its interests. This way of posing the question seems to me to underestimate drastically the latitude which people have had to respond in different ways to the transformed social-economic order of the later 19th and 20th centuries, and to suggest—but not to demonstrate—that capital has exercised an enormous direct influence in this sphere.

The introduction which I have found most helpful is Rose Laub Coser (ed.), *The Family. Its Structures and Functions*, 2nd edn., *London* 1974; see in particular the imaginative and well documented essay by Judith Blake, 'Coercive Pronatalism and American Population Policy', which deals with basic sociological aspects of the problem, aspects which I have largely neglected, and makes suggestions for a causal analysis. Karin Hausen, 'Familie als Gegenstand historischer Sozialwissenschaft', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, vol. 1 no. 2/3, 1975 is an excellent discussion of the historical literature. The three-part review essay by Christopher Lasch, 'The Family and History', *New York Review of Books*, vol. xxii, nos. 18-20, Nov.-Dec. 1975, contains a wide range of incisive and thoughtful judgements. The work of Lutz Niethammer (Essen) on the housing market and changes in working-class...
dwelling patterns in Germany since the 1870s is opening up a new dimension of empirical and theoretical enquiry into the history of the family, which also brings out the novelty of the modern family unit; before 1900 many working-class families had no place where they could constitute themselves in a stable and defined manner: 'Wie wohnten die Arbeiter im Kaiserreich?', Archiv für Sozialgeschichte, vol. xvi, 1976.

60 I use the term ideology here in Marx's sense, to denote a set of bed-rock assumptions, responses and notions, not in the more trivial sense of specific public ideals, deliberately propagated. Reversion for the family on these counts cuts across most political alignments today, though different parties and regimes may adopt different types of family policy in recognition of their commitment. To remain with Marx, it is interesting that the family as an ideal has survived the decline of one of its strongest supports, organized religion—perhaps it has even become a substitute, a new 'opium of the people', again in Marx's exact sense.

61 These tentative concluding remarks were suggested by Sheila Rowbotham's work, in particular by Woman's Consciousness, Man's World, Harmondsworth 1973, chs. 7 and 8.

62 See the quotation from Hitler at the start of Part I of this article: History Workshop, no. 1, Spring 1976, p. 74. The emotional patterns which I have tried to sketch in here in general terms are perhaps most clearly documented in the memoirs of Rudolf Hoess, The Commandant of Auschwitz, London 1959.


64 Although this is not true of some recent social history which aims to elucidate social structures and processes, it seems to me to be true of the discipline as a whole. The notion of what constitutes a significant public action is, of course, being broadened all the time by the work of social historians. But it remains the case, for example, that women's movements furnish the only aspect of the history of women which has been widely researched into.


66 Wolfgang Köllmann, in Hans Mommsen, Dietmar Petzina and Bernd Weisbrod (eds.), Industrielles System und Politische Entwicklung in der Weimarer Republik, Düsseldorf 1974, p. 76. Since he wrote these words, one highly technical monograph has appeared, which is a contribution to a discussion among demographers rather than a study in social history: John E. Knodel, The Decline of Fertility in Germany 1871-1939, Princeton 1974.

67 Since Part I of this article was completed, Peter H. Merkl's study, Political Violence under the Swastika, 381 Early Nazis, Princeton 1975, has been published. It contains some interesting evidence (pp. 117-137) on the motives and attitudes of 36 women who joined the Nazi Party before 1933.