

**“The Women’s Hell”: Distinctions Between Forms of Sexual Violence at the Ravensbrück  
Concentration Camp, the Liberalization of Sexuality in the Weimar Republic, and the  
Exploitation of Sexuality in the Third Reich**

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“THE WOMEN’S HELL”: DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN FORMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE  
AT THE RAVENSBRÜCK CONCENTRATION CAMP, THE LIBERALIZATION OF  
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IN THE THIRD REICH

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## Introduction

The Ravensbrück concentration camp located in northern Germany acted as the only Nazi concentration camp designated exclusively for women following the closure of the Lichtenburg camp in 1939. Construction of Ravensbrück, “the women’s hell”, officially began in 1938.<sup>1</sup> As early as 1939 women held in other camps, ghettos, prisons, and sanatoriums across the Reich were transported to Ravensbrück. Asocials and political prisoners made up the majority of the population at Ravensbrück for the duration of its existence, but there was a Jewish presence in the camp as well. Roughly 133,000 women and children from 40 different countries entered the main camp during its six years of operation between 1939 and 1945. Between 25,000 and 30,000 of these prisoners did not survive.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the fact that mass executions by gas chamber occurred within the camp, Ravensbrück has received limited scholarly attention. This lack of research and individualized scholarship may be explained by several factors. At the end of World War II, Soviet forces liberated Ravensbrück and the camp was later controlled by the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The camp’s location east of the Iron Curtain limited access to information and resources from the camp. Even after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR, Ravensbrück and the stories of the women imprisoned there were largely ignored.<sup>3</sup> Judith Buber Agassi acknowledges the difficulties and delays to scholarly research. She argues that “the gender of the Ravensbrück prisoners had made them less important to the mainly male commemorators of the Holocaust.”<sup>4</sup> Rochelle G. Saidel agrees with Agassi’s assessment “that the camp’s definition as a

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey P. Megargee, ed., *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2009) 1,189.

<sup>2</sup> “Ravensbrück,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ravensbrueck>.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Buber Agassi, *Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück* (Oxford, One World, 2007), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

women's camp added to the lack of interest among the predominantly male circles of Holocaust scholars and survivors," but acknowledges that this speculation cannot be proven.<sup>5</sup>

Not only was gender a potential factor in the lack of scholarship of Ravensbrück prisoners, but the reasons for the women's imprisonment may also have played a role. A majority of the female prisoners at Ravensbrück were asocials or political and religious dissidents. These asocials included thieves, prostitutes, lesbians, and other societal outcasts. The actions of these individuals leading to their imprisonment in Ravensbrück, categorized as criminal offenses, created moral ambiguity that was more complicated than a dichotomy between innocent victim and Nazi perpetrator. As Nicholas Wachsmann states, "Historians have been uncomfortable dealing with victims of Nazi violence who could not be portrayed as completely innocent."<sup>6</sup> The challenge of addressing the complexity surrounding these particular prisoners may have discouraged initial research.

The distinction of asocials as a separate prisoner categorization was not invented by the Nazi Party. Rather, scientific thought related to eugenics was popularized during the Weimar Republic. These theories posited a link between criminality and genetics and advocated for indefinite incarceration, sterilization, and euthanasia.<sup>7</sup> The normalization of these scientific theories and their proposed application to the criminal justice system set a precedent for the form of incarceration exercised against the women of Ravensbrück. Examining the connection between the scientific support for eugenics and changes to legal and criminal policy reveals how

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<sup>5</sup> Rochelle G. Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Nikolaus Wachsmann, "From Indefinite Confinement to Extermination: "Habitual Criminals" in the Third Reich," in *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*, ed. Robert Gellately and Nathan Stoltzfus (Princeton University Press, 2001), 165.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

the lives and behavior of these women were criminalized, culminating in their imprisonment in Ravensbrück.

Asocials, such as prostitutes and lesbians, were also subject to indefinite imprisonment for their criminal activity. The Weimar Republic had created a more liberal Germany with the end of state-regulated prostitution and increased leniency regarding homosexuality. Nazi policy regarding sexuality largely functioned as a conservative reaction to the liberalizing laws of the Weimar era. Eric D. Weitz's *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* provides a thorough investigation of the legal and cultural changes which took place in Germany between 1918 and 1933. Weitz specifically discusses changing views of prostitution and sexuality through an examination of the sex reform movement. By acknowledging the changing cultural views on 'criminal activities' such as prostitution and homosexuality, Weitz presents a strong overview of Weimar policy to be contrasted against Nazi policy on sexuality.<sup>8</sup>

Julia Roos's "Backlash Against Prostitutes' Rights" focuses specifically on the issue of prostitution. Roos effectively explains the apparent contradictions in Nazi policy simultaneously advocating for an end to all prostitution and the imprisonment of known or suspected prostitutes and creating both military and concentration brothels facilitating forced prostitution.<sup>9</sup> The Nazi view on sexuality, and more specifically, female sexuality, is integral to an understanding of the sexual violence perpetrated against women during the Holocaust. While the Nazis did not commit all acts of sexual violence during this time, the social upheaval and human degradation within the concentration camps, created an environment of lawlessness, violence, and desperation allowing for additional sexual violations to occur.

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<sup>8</sup> Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 297-330.

<sup>9</sup> Julia Roos, "Backlash against Prostitutes' Rights: Origins and Dynamics of Nazi Prostitution Policies," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no.1/2 (2002): 69.

The delays to research and scholarship, regardless of the reasons, are reflected within the limited historiography of the Ravensbrück concentration camp. In recent years, researchers have begun to address this dearth of scholarship. More specialized sources have emerged such as social and economic histories, as well as those focused exclusively on the experience of Jewish women within the camp.

One of the most recent additions to the historical study of Ravensbrück concentration camp is *Ravensbrück: Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp* by Sarah Helm. Her 700-page examination of the Ravensbrück concentration camp offers a comprehensive biography of the concentration camp, "beginning at the beginning and ending at the end."<sup>10</sup> Helm not only examines the history of Ravensbrück, but utilizes the biographical information in order to study a wider history of Nazi policies and the Holocaust in general.<sup>11</sup> She divides her work into six major portions, beginning with the arrival and training of female SS guards as Ravensbrück began to open. What is truly impressive and unique about Helm's *Ravensbrück* is her use of primary source memoirs and interviews she herself conducted with numerous survivors.

Helm's *Ravensbrück* communicates the full story not only of the personal, individual experiences of the prisoners at Ravensbrück, but also of the generalized suffering endured under Nazi rule. In her conclusion, Helm argues that Ravensbrück was the "capital of the [Nazi] crime[s] against women."<sup>12</sup> She explains that "Ravensbrück showed what mankind was capable of doing to women. The nature and atrocity done here to women had never been seen before. Ravensbrück should never have had to fight 'on the margins' for a voice: it was – and is – a story

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<sup>10</sup> Sarah Helm, *Ravensbrück: Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 2015), xxiii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 650.

in its own right.”<sup>13</sup> Helm’s *Ravensbrück* successfully acknowledges individual suffering as well as the worldwide significance of these atrocities. She argues the merit for further study and scholarship pertaining to Ravensbrück with the purpose of creating a larger dialogue within Holocaust studies which would include Ravensbrück and the women who were imprisoned there.

Rochelle G. Saidel’s *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp* is a more specialized examination of the Ravensbrück concentration camp. While Ravensbrück was largely ignored in early scholarship, the Jewish women imprisoned within the camp were further overlooked within this limited scholarship. Intended as a concentration camp for political prisoners and asocials, Jewish women were consistently a minority in Ravensbrück’s prisoner population.<sup>14</sup> The camp acted as a waystation for many Jewish women who were subsequently transported to another concentration camp such as Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen.<sup>15</sup> *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück* is Saidel’s effort to recognize the Jewish women held at Ravensbrück and alter the pervading narrative to include these Jewish prisoners. Notably, Saidel devotes entire chapters to the lives and actions of specific prisoners. These extensive biographies highlight Jewish prisoners’ lives before the war, during their imprisonment at Ravensbrück, and for those who survived, their lives following liberation. These intricate and detailed cameos set Saidel’s work apart from other sources that examine Jewish prisoners and contributes significantly to the overall historiography of Ravensbrück.

*Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* also focuses on the Jewish prisoners of Ravensbrück. Edited by Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, this work continues the discussion of the unique experience of Jewish women during the Holocaust. The

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 649-650

<sup>14</sup> Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., xvi.

women of Ravensbrück experienced various forms of sexual violence such as forced sterilization, forced and botched abortions, and forced prostitution in camp brothels.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps most significantly, this work is “the first interdisciplinary anthology on women and sexual abuse during the Holocaust.”<sup>17</sup> As Hedgepeth and Saidel argue, “this volume, by broadening and deepening the comprehension of Jewish women’s experiences of rape and other forms of sexual violence during the Holocaust, will enrich understanding and provoke continued study of this subject.”<sup>18</sup> *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* provides a justification for additional in-depth studies of sexual violence and violation as a central theme of the Holocaust.

*Women and the Holocaust: Different Voices* aims to provide an analysis of “the particularities of women’s experiences” during the Holocaust and how these experiences compared to those of men.<sup>19</sup> Edited by Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, this work fills gaps in the Holocaust historiography where past scholarship had ignored the impact of sexual and gender distinctions on personal experience. The second section of this book focuses on how Nazi theory and practice both targeted and impacted women. Scholars contributing to this section contend that “the Holocaust’s killing operations, especially where the Jews were concerned, made explicit distinctions between men and women.”<sup>20</sup> These authors assert that the Nazis distinguished between male and female, even within their racial discrimination and that an emphasis on the experiences of women presents a more complete examination of the Holocaust’s

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<sup>16</sup> Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, eds. *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 160.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, eds. *Women and the Holocaust: Different Voices* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1993), xi.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

significance.<sup>21</sup> Notably, *Different Voices* addresses several topics that are sometimes avoided as controversial, such as abortion, lesbianism, menstruation, prostitution and sterilization. *Women and the Holocaust: Different Voices* contributes significantly to Holocaust historiography by working to close gaps in both general Holocaust studies as well as in historiography specifically related to women's Holocaust studies through their examination of traditionally avoided subtopics.

Similar to Saidel's work, Judith Buber Agassi's *Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück* examines the experiences specific to the Jewish women imprisoned in Ravensbrück. Her inspiration for this work stemmed from the experiences of her mother, Margarete Buber-Neumann, a prisoner and survivor of the Ravensbrück concentration camp.<sup>22</sup> Agassi describes the purpose of *Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück* as an effort to "rescue from oblivion the memory of thousands of Jewish women, girls, and children imprisoned in the only Nazi concentration camp exclusively for women."<sup>23</sup> *Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück* contributes a great deal to the historiography of Ravensbrück. Unique to this work, Agassi proposes five different time periods to divide and analyze the changes of the Jewish population at Ravensbrück. The five periods Agassi offers reveal population and demographic trends among the Jewish women throughout Ravensbrück's existence. For each of the five time periods, Agassi examines factors such as total numbers of Jewish women, countries of origin, official reasons for arrest, age groups, marital statuses, and the conditions of everyday camp life in Ravensbrück. *Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück* highlights the changes in Nazi orders and policies. Sizable reductions in the Jewish population at Ravensbrück mark the issuing of extermination

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Agassi, *Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück*, xix.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 1.

and deportation orders where a significant number of these Jewish prisoners were sent to the gas chamber or relocated to a different concentration camp. Massive increases in the Jewish population during the fifth period demarcate the arrival of evacuation trains and death marches as the Allies approached other Nazi concentration camps. These figures and Agassi's interpretation of them, provide a significant tool for analyzing not only the Jewish experience of everyday life in Ravensbrück, but also how changes in the war effort and Nazi policy directly impacted these prisoners.

Another significant historiographical work on the Ravensbrück concentration camp is Jack G. Morrison's *Ravensbrück*. Morrison was an important contributor to the development of the Ravensbrück archives following the departure of the Russian army in 1994. While *Ravensbrück* does act as a biography of the camp in much the same way as Helm's *Ravensbrück*, Morrison chooses to focus on everyday life in the camp for the prisoners rather than a detailed account of the camp's history. He states, "[T]his book is an attempt to reconstruct the workings of everyday life of the concentration camp at Ravensbrück."<sup>24</sup> What truly differentiates this work from others on the topic is its focus on social dynamics and relationships amongst the women within the camp. It specifically sheds light on the personal interactions between the prisoners of Ravensbrück. Morrison's investigation of different social dynamics begins with an extensive look at the different prisoner categories and how and when these groups had the opportunity to interact. Morrison ultimately concludes that Ravensbrück cannot be considered "a community" because it was "too diverse and heterogenous."<sup>25</sup> Morrison argues instead that a series of

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<sup>24</sup> Jack G. Morrison, *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life in a Women's Concentration Camp* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1999), ix.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

subcultures developed within the camp and that these subcultures were largely based on language and nationality.

While the main focus of this thesis is an examination of Ravensbrück as a case study for forms of sexual violence against women during the Holocaust, changes made to the criminal justice and legal system as well as cultural liberalization during the Weimar Republic must be addressed first due to the prisoner demographics of the camp. Dedicated exclusively to the imprisonment of women, Ravensbrück housed political and religious dissidents, Jewish women, and those categorized as asocials, such as Romani (Sinti and Roma)<sup>26</sup>, criminals, prostitutes, and lesbians. Examining the Nazi retaliation to Weimar era policy reveals the inevitable progression leading to the women's eventual confinement in Ravensbrück. Chapter one begins with an inspection of the policies and culture of the Weimar Republic, specifically focusing on changes to the general perception of and legal status of social outcasts such as homosexuals and prostitutes. Analysis of the gaining popularity of eugenic theory and its applications to the criminal justice system, even prior to the Nazi takeover, reveals the natural progression towards indefinite incarceration. Lastly, chapter one evaluates the inherent contradictions between Nazi views and politics regarding female sexuality. While promising to return morality to the motherland, the Nazi Party enacted contradictory policies regarding promiscuity, pornography, and prostitution, with restrictions varying depending on racial and social status.

Chapter two focuses on the history of Ravensbrück itself. Beginning with an overview of the temporary women's camps at Lichtenburg Castle and Moringen, the investigation moves to encompass the purchase and construction of the main camp at Ravensbrück, as well as several prominent subcamps. The chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the staff and prisoners

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<sup>26</sup> Please note that "Gypsy" is a pejorative term. Any references to Romani prisoners utilizing the term "Gypsy" are direct quotes.

held within the camp. Functioning as a training ground for female SS guards as well as a work camp for female prisoners, Ravensbrück operated under a strict hierarchy. Due to the vastly different reasons for their imprisonment and their personal and cultural backgrounds, the social system between the prisoners was complicated and sometimes contentious. An examination of the different prisoner demographics reveals the unique characteristics and motivations of each group. Nazi categorizations and color-coded triangles helped to separate the imprisoned women into factions. Acknowledging the differences, disagreements, and lack of solidarity between prisoner groups further demonstrates the complicated nature of daily life within Ravensbrück.

Chapter three presents distinct categorizations of sexual violence. Grounded in primary source memoirs and interviews, the seven proposed categorizations provide a more accurate examination of the crimes perpetrated against women during the Holocaust. Constructing categorizations such as sexual humiliation, molestation, bartering and sexual extortion, forced prostitution, medical experimentation and reproductive mutilation, abortion and infanticide, and rape, allows for a more thorough acknowledgement of individual suffering. Specific categories of sexual violence prevent both a value comparison between different forms of violence, as well as ahistorical projections of morality on actions taken by victims. While this thesis utilizes Ravensbrück as a case study in order to develop these categories, these general classifications can be applied to investigations of other concentration camps or areas of war. It is important to note that sexual violence was not an official goal of the Nazi Party. The Nazis intended to dehumanize their prisoners through degrading treatment and conditions. Sexual humiliation may not have been the purpose of policies such as forced nudity, but it was certainly a byproduct. While the consequence of sexual violence may have been unintentional, it does not negate the reality that Nazi policy resulted in both degradation and sexual violence.

Until recently, Holocaust scholarship has largely overlooked the history of Ravensbrück as well as the complicated demographics of prisoners in the camp. Examining the history of the camp and the demographics of the prisoners simultaneously acknowledges the lives and suffering of the women imprisoned there. The conservative backlash against the liberal Weimar era resulted in the persecution of many different groups of women. Increasingly popular eugenic theory inspired changes to laws connecting genetics to criminality. Nazi perceptions of race, criminality, and female sexuality not only allowed for incarceration, but also the perpetration of sexually violent acts against women. This violence, historically both underrepresented and misrepresented, is integral to an accurate account of the Holocaust. The nuanced and complicated morality of the Holocaust must be addressed. Due to criminal histories, leftist political affiliations, and outsider social status, the women imprisoned at Ravensbrück have been especially vulnerable to scholarly dismissal. Ravensbrück concentration camp demonstrates the impact of government perception of sexuality as well as the severity of sexual violence against women.

## Chapter One

Nazi policies regulating sexuality demonstrated a conservative reaction to the liberal social politics of the Weimar Republic and a rejection of the growing influence of women in the realm of politics. The Weimar Republic, 1918-1933, was led by a democratic government that emphasized expanding individual opportunity and the general well-being of the German people. It attempted to recover from World War I and deal with national issues such as economic instability, inequality, and depression. German culture at this time became more liberal as well. Art and media incorporated sexual imagery and nudity of both men and women, creating new cultural ideals. The sex reform movement gathered a great deal of support calling for new sexual education and laws. The entrance of women into the public sphere of the state and exiting the private sphere of the home became a symbol of cultural decline for conservative parties. Once in power, the Nazi Party, and its conservative supporters, focused not only on reversing liberal policies which had been codified into law, but also removing elements of what they had identified as cultural degeneracy from society entirely.

In both popular and standard historical portrayals, the Third Reich is shown as sexually repressive. However, the policies the Nazis enacted regarding sexuality were more complex than this. Rather than repress sexuality universally, the Nazi Party instead redefined and limited who could have sex with whom.<sup>1</sup> In their rise to power, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party successfully portrayed themselves as guardians of morality despite the contradictions within their political aims. The Third Reich discouraged promiscuity to prevent the spread of prostitution and diseases, but simultaneously encouraged promiscuity amongst the 'racially pure' in an attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 18.

increase the German birthrate, aid military efforts, and prevent male homosexuality.<sup>2</sup> During its ascension to power, the National Socialist Party courted conservative Christians and their views of sexuality by promising to return morality to Germany, end prostitution, and preserve the sanctity of marriage.<sup>3</sup> After securing political control, the Nazis replaced the deregulated prostitution of Weimar Germany with the return of state-run brothels; however, marriage did not become a political priority as extramarital affairs among Aryans had the potential to produce more Aryan children. These blatant contradictions within the policies of the Third Reich often occurred along gender or racial lines. Women were granted less sexual freedom than men and those women deemed 'racially impure' were restricted from having sexual contact outside of their race. The issues of promiscuity, pornography, and prostitution clearly demonstrate the contradictions within Nazi propaganda and policy intended to restore moral purity.

### **Sex Reform and the Weimar Republic**

The Weimar Republic is often identified with "the radical remaking of sexual norms."<sup>4</sup> The sex reform movement, 1919-1933, generated both popular support and policy change. Leaders of this movement included intellectuals and physicians with many having left-wing political affiliations. Developed from the economic instability and devastation of World War I, the sex reform movement advocated for better, more pleasurable, and safer sex for everyone. While the majority of reform leaders focused specifically on heterosexual intercourse, others not only acknowledged homosexuality but promoted more open acceptance of it. Magnus Hirschfeld, in particular, even campaigned against homophobic legislation and prejudices.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wachsmann, "From Indefinite Confinement to Extermination." In *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*, ed. Robert Gellately and Nathan Stoltzfus, 195.

<sup>3</sup> Herzog, *Sex after Fascism*, 44.

<sup>4</sup> Laurie Marhoefer, "Degeneration, Sexual Freedom, and the Politics of the Weimar Republic, 1918-1933," *German Studies Review* 34/3 (2011): 529.

<sup>5</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 300.

Leaders of the movement connected their political parties to sex reform, truly believing that sex reform would not only improve individual lives but also improve society as a whole by creating happier and more productive citizens.

A major influence on the sex reformation movement was the 1926 book *Sexual Catastrophes*. Written by four physicians and a criminologist, *Sexual Catastrophes* described the pervasive nature of sexual misery in the form of “syphilis, prostitution, illegal abortions, impotence, [and] unhappy marriages...”<sup>6</sup> Physicians participating in the sex reform movement included a large number of female physicians and those serving in low income and impoverished areas. Here these physicians witnessed the effects of both poverty and sexual politics on the German people. Their experience treating prostitutes for venereal diseases and women with severe injuries due to illegal abortions, prompted the physicians to advocate for comprehensive sexual education, the availability of birth control, and the decriminalization of abortions. Reformers such as Max Hodann argued against his fellow physicians “who moralized about the sanctity of life yet ignored the real conditions that trapped so many women and men, making every child a burden, and ensuring that quick...sex was virtually the norm.”<sup>7</sup>

Leaders and physicians of the sex reform movement not only published their theories and political tenets, but also traveled extensively throughout Germany presenting their ideas. Dutch physician Theodor Hendrik van de Velde embarked on a lecture tour of Germany in 1926 following the publication of his *Ideal Marriage*.<sup>8</sup> The majority of sex reform lecturers, including Velde, attempted to provide a cure for the German masses suffering from ‘sexual misery’. Treatments included sexual education, lengthy foreplay, mutual pleasure, and aftercare. As

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<sup>6</sup> *Sexual-Katastrophen: Bilder aus dem modernen Geschlechts-und Eheleben* (Leipzig: A.H. Payne, 1926), ix-x.

<sup>7</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 303.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

Velde argued, “enduring happiness” in marriage required sexual pleasure derived from “explicit knowledge”.<sup>9</sup> Reform-inspired books functioned as both sexual education textbooks and sex manuals, complete with detailed illustrations, diagrams, and instructions. Conservatives vehemently opposed sexual liberation and the entirety of the sex reform movement.<sup>10</sup> However, both liberal reformers and conservatives agreed that sex was never exclusively a private matter and that sex had to have a social and political purpose.

Hirschfeld founded the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* (Institute of Sexual Research) in 1919. This non-profit foundation was located in Berlin and offered medical care as well as sex and family counseling. Notably, the library and archive of the *Institut* held between 12,000 and 20,000 books and manuscripts, and a larger collection of photographs all related to sexual topics. Hirschfeld’s *Sexual Pathologie: Ein Lehrbuch für Ärzte und Studierende* (*Sexual Pathology: A Textbook for Physicians and Students*) was a three volume work including a vast number of sexual practices and medical treatments. Written during World War I, Hirschfeld believed and hoped to demonstrate “that ‘life- affirming love’ could counter war’s rejection of life.”<sup>11</sup>

The sex reform movement began, and was strongest, at the local level. Reformers, Social Democrats, and Weimar Coalition parties made up the majority on many city councils and municipal governments. The strength of the reform movement at this level led to the opening of a large number of family and sex-counseling clinics, even in smaller towns.<sup>12</sup> Sex reform league membership exceeded 150,000 and influenced many outside of their members through writing, lectures, demonstrations, and the sale of birth control.<sup>13</sup> Birth control in the form of condoms and

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<sup>9</sup> Theodore H. van de Velde, *Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique*, rev. ed., trans. Stella Browne (German original 1926; New York: Random House, 1930), 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 323.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament,” *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 76.

diaphragms became more available to the general public. Sex reform league members included “laypeople, health-care professionals, social workers, activists in the socialist and communist parties, and government officials.”<sup>14</sup> A large popular movement crossing class, gender, and political lines emerged in connection with sex reform leagues protesting against paragraph 218 of the Weimar Constitution, the legal provision criminalizing abortion. An estimated 50,000 women per year died from complications related to illegal abortion.<sup>15</sup> While the campaign failed to legalize abortion, “the law was relaxed, and the offense reduced in 1927 from a felony to a misdemeanor.”<sup>16</sup>

While the Nazi Party weaponized the falling birthrate as part of their platform and rejected the liberal Weimar government, sex reformers of the Weimar Republic were also concerned with birthrate. As Eric D. Weitz explains, “For those who believed that national power rested on a large and vigorous population, and for everyone who lamented the dismal health conditions and life opportunities of so many Germans, the statistics were disturbing indeed.”<sup>17</sup> Family size had dropped to an average of one child per household and the birthrate had fallen to half of what it had been in 1900.<sup>18</sup> While Nazi propaganda blamed this decline on inferior races, abortion, female emancipation, and homosexuality, the sex reform movement attributed the falling birthrate to economic instability and a lack of sexual fulfillment.<sup>19</sup>

It is difficult to determine the success of the sex reform movement outside of politics. Within the urban areas, it does appear that a personal sexual revolution occurred at this time. The pharmaceutical industry produced 80-90 million condoms annually. Gay bars and underground

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<sup>14</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 304.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>16</sup> Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 128-129.

<sup>17</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 305.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

publications thrived in major cities such as Berlin and Hamburg.<sup>20</sup> Gay and lesbian films emphasized the prevalence of homosexual culture. Notable films *Anders als die Andern* (Different from the Others) and *Mädchen in Uniform* (Girls in Uniform) were unabashedly rooted in gay and lesbian culture. While film censorship had technically been suspended at the beginning of the Weimar Republic, additional legislation was passed in August of 1920 allowing for *Anders als die Andern* to be banned from distribution. Screenings of the film were still shown to doctors and students or at institutes of higher learning, and most screenings of *Andres* accompanied Hirschfeld's lectures.<sup>21</sup>

Prior to the global depression, the Weimar government also attempted to repeal the law criminalizing male homosexual sex or "sodomy" (*widernatürliche Unzucht*). The penal code reform committee voted to cut the section from the updated criminal code which would have effectively decriminalized sex between two men, with some exceptions. This revision failed to become law before the Nazi Party came to power.<sup>22</sup> While some members of Germany's homosexual emancipation movement celebrated the vote as a step towards liberation, other members believed that it was "an illusion of liberation, and perhaps a dangerous one."<sup>23</sup>

The religious reaction to the sex reform movement not only reveals additional hostility towards the liberalization of the Weimar Republic, but also foreshadows the propaganda of the Nazi Party and its attempts to gain the support of conservative Christians during its rise to power. The two major denominations of the Weimar Republic, Lutheran and Catholic, both rejected the sexual revolution and argued that family and morality were required for a healthy nation.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 126.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Dyer, "Less and More than Women and Men: Lesbian and Gay Cinema in Weimar Germany," *New German Critique* Autumn, No. 51 (1990): 10.

<sup>22</sup> Marhoefer, "Degeneration, Sexual Freedom, and the Politics of the Weimar Republic, 1918-1933," 538.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 324.

Frequent sermons as well as religious forums advocated for a return to church teachings and asserted that the government of the Weimar Republic was responsible for promoting sexual immorality. Protestants viewed the declining birthrate, number of abortions, and venereal diseases as signs of a weakened moral standard, and by extension, a weakened nation.<sup>25</sup> The moral crisis itself was blamed on radical socialism and radical individualism which were characteristic of the government. Both churches fought against the sex reform movement, opposing the relaxation of divorce laws or the legalization of abortion. As Weitz explains, “For committed Christians, the republic was identical with sex talk, family-limitation strategies, the new woman, and the skyrocketing abortion and divorce rates. The republic lacked a moral center; in fact, it actively promoted the opposite immorality.”<sup>26</sup>

### **The ‘New Woman’, Body Fascination, and the Weimar Republic**

A byproduct of the sex reform movement, the idea of the ‘new woman’ developed and became “the most renowned symbol of the sexual revolution of the 1920s.”<sup>27</sup> The ‘new woman’, had a short, bobbed haircut, known as a *Bubikopf*. She was “slender, erotic, and amaternal. She smoked and sometimes wore men’s clothes. She went out alone, had sex as she pleased. She worked, typically in an office or in the arts, and lived for today and for herself.”<sup>28</sup> Unlike the women of the past, singularly devoted to their husband, children, and home, the ‘new woman’ desired equal rights and economic independence. Young, unmarried women were the most attracted to this ideal. Older, more conservative, women typically rejected the ‘new woman’. As Richard J. Evans argues, “The sexual freedom evidently enjoyed by the young in the big cities was a particular source of disapproval in the older generation...Their puritanism, expressed in

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 326

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 305-307.

campaigns against pornographic books and sexually explicit films and paintings, and in denunciations of young women who preferred dance halls to reading groups, seemed ridiculous to many women amongst the younger generation...”<sup>29</sup> The ‘new woman’ was an ideal that was relatively limited to the upper classes and not achievable for the majority of German women. In 1925, roughly one-third of German women worked outside of the home, typically at low-paying factory and office jobs.<sup>30</sup> While the ‘new woman’ was largely unattainable for the masses, this image of womanhood did spread to the lower classes and outside of the city into rural areas. Women working in factories contributed to a collection of autobiographical writings in 1930. *Mein Arbeitstag, mein Wochennde (My Working Day, My Weekend)* provides insight into the lives of women during this time and their personal struggles. One woman described her difficulty balancing her work and home life as well as her attempts for a personal life or as she describes, “to be a human being and live like one.”<sup>31</sup> This internal struggle for self-fulfillment pushed some women to celebrate the ideal of the ‘new woman’ even if it was not within their grasp. As Elsa Herrmann posits in *So ist die neue Frau (This Is the New Woman)*, World War I functioned to “awaken...them from their lethargy and laid upon them the responsibility for their own fate.”<sup>32</sup>

Reactions to the ‘new woman’ were both strong and polarizing. As Weitz articulates, “The new woman was the most visible, most talked about, most conflicted symbol of the moral and sexual revolution of the 1920s.”<sup>33</sup> This ideal was seen as either the pinnacle of female emancipation or a sign of cultural degradation and immorality. Radios, magazines, newspapers, church pulpits, and the government all discussed the status of women in society. The expansion

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<sup>29</sup> Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 126; 129.

<sup>30</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 307.

<sup>31</sup> “*Mein Arbeitstag – mein Wochennde*”: *Arbeiterinnen berichten von ihrem Alltag* 1928, reprint, ed. Alf Lüdke (1930; Hamburg: Ergebnisse Verlag, 1991), 18.

<sup>32</sup> Elsa Herrmann, “This Is the New Woman,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 206-208.

<sup>33</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 311-312.

of the public sphere which occurred simultaneously in the 1920s and early 1930s exacerbated the spread and combative nature of this discourse. *Die Frau von Morgen: Wie wir sie wünschen (The Woman of Tomorrow: How We Wish Her to Be)* examined the changes and advances of the status of women and imagined potential growth for the future. Written exclusively by male authors, *Die Frau von Morgen* revealed a complicated reaction to female emancipation even among men who supported the movement. While praising liberal changes to society, the writers spoke condescendingly of women emphasizing the freedom that men had granted them, expressed an uneasy sentiment towards empowered women, and conveyed an intense sexual objectification and attraction. Writer and journalist Axel Eggebrecht described female emancipation as “a kind of poison in the smallest doses” and that “the single erotic result of this so-called emancipation has been eminently negative.”<sup>34</sup>

The lead contributor to *Die Frau von Morgen*, Stefan Zweig, was truly enamored by the ideal of the new woman, not only sexually but also intellectually and politically. Zweig predicted that full equality between men and women would emerge only when women could express their freedom through sexuality without fear of venereal diseases or unwanted pregnancy.<sup>35</sup> While the sex reform movement did liberate women to make their own sexual decisions to some degree, it also created additional complications surrounding consent. Women who lived as a ‘new woman’ or participated in more progressive social circles but refused sexual advances were subject to criticism regarding their latent sexual inhibitions.<sup>36</sup> In 1930, author Grete Ujhely wrote, “Have you ever said no to one of the lords of creation?...The result is a popular lecture for the next half hour from the angle of psychoanalysis, with primary emphasis on that nice, handy word

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<sup>34</sup> Axel Eggebrecht, “Machen wir uns nichts vor: Ein aufrichtiger Brief,” in *Die Frau von Morgen*, 109-126.

<sup>35</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 310.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

*inhibitions*...the man in his fine logical security concludes that you are either frigid or stupid. Usually both.”<sup>37</sup>

The ‘new woman’ was not the only symbol of the sex reform movement. Both male and female bodies were put on display in different ways than ever before. Many people were more casually dressed and scantily clad. Nudity became more prevalent onstage or at the beach. As Weitz explains, “The difference between a Berlin street scene circa 1900 – women corseted and covered, men so formally dressed – and 1926 would be patently clear to any observer.”<sup>38</sup> This was a reaction to both the war and the revolution overthrowing the empire as, “Both events seriously undermined deference to authority, including the prevailing moral and sexual standards of imperial Germany. For many people, body emancipation, whether in bed, on the streets, or at the beach, was one very powerful way to be modern and to display one’s rejection of the confining world of pre-1918 Germany.”<sup>39</sup>

Debate over gender image and “body-fascination” was not reserved for women.<sup>40</sup> The *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* emphasized male beauty. While the magazine did not feature nudity, it did publish images defining the ideal German man. Male bodies and their strength were put on display with the popularization of boxing in the 1920s. Advocacy for nudism also emerged with mass support. As Matthew Jefferies notes, “British and American travelers during the 1920s were frequently moved to comment on the extent to which public nudity was becoming a feature of everyday life in Germany.”<sup>41</sup> American husband and wife, Frances and Mason Merrill recorded a German newspaper headline from August 10, 1930 in their memoir *Among the*

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<sup>37</sup> Grete Ujhely, “A Call for Sexual Tolerance,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 711.

<sup>38</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 312.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

<sup>41</sup> Frances and Mason Merrill, *Among the Nudists* (London, 1931), 184.

*Nudists*. The headline claimed that over three million Germans practiced public nudity. While this is most likely an exaggeration, the headline and the Merrill's memoir demonstrate that nudism was popular. *Der Mensch und die Sonne (Man and Sun)* praised nudity and nature arguing that nudity united the body and soul.<sup>42</sup>

Author Hans Surén described the experience of outdoor nudity as “a marvelous feeling of freedom...a marvelous revelation in the beauty and strength of the naked body, transfigured by god-like purity shining from the clear and open eye that mirrors the entire depth of a noble and questing soul...”<sup>43</sup> Attributing nudism to the ancient Greeks and Romans, Surén argued that reviving nudism would simultaneously revive the health of the collective German race, or *Volkskörper*. Homoeroticism is evident in *Der Mensch und die Sonne* with images of naked men exercising in fields, swimming in lakes, and Surén's prose “worshiping...the naked, powerful, bronzed male body...”<sup>44</sup> While Surén was much more passionate about men, he did advise that women strengthen their bodies through “rhythmic exercise”<sup>45</sup> As Weitz explains, “The kind of body culture Surén promoted had supporters all across the political spectrum, even if not all of them went as far as he did in advocating nudity. The health of the nation, so virtually every political movement or party proclaimed, rested on healthy bodies and an active communion with nature.”<sup>46</sup>

### **Prostitution and the Weimar Republic**

One of the resounding successes of the Weimar Republic was an end to state-regulated prostitution. In 1927, the Reichstag passed a law removing police oversight of prostitution.

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<sup>42</sup> Hans Surén, *Der Mensch und die Sonne*, (Stuttgart: Dieck and Co., 1925), 14-17.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 317.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

Known as *Reichsgesetz zur Bekämpfung der Geschlechtskrankheiten* (The Law for Combating Venereal Disease), this law successfully abolished *Reglementierung* or *Kontrolle* (regulation or control) of prostitution.<sup>47</sup> Regulated prostitution had severely limited the individual rights and freedoms of prostitutes. Alain Corbin defined “police-controlled prostitution as a ‘carceral system,’ which confined registered prostitutes to the enclosed spaces of the brothel, the hospital, and the prison.”<sup>48</sup> As Julia Roos argues, “regulationism played an important role in the protection of bourgeois notions of sexual propriety and social order...regulationism thus combined middle-class concerns about ‘immorality’ with the bureaucracy’s interest in preserving its independence from legal and democratic controls.”<sup>49</sup> Regulationism placed stringent requirements on prostitutes including regular hygienic controls and restrictions regarding “their place of residence, freedom of movement, attire, and public behavior.”<sup>50</sup>

Prior to 1927, prostitutes were required to register with the *Sittenpolizei*, the morals police, and subjected to regular examinations for sexually transmitted diseases. Those who were infected were quarantined in the hospital and underwent compulsory medical treatment.<sup>51</sup> Prostitutes violating regulations could be punished with a few weeks in prison. If they had a previous conviction for the same violation, they could be detained in a workhouse for up to two years.<sup>52</sup> Prostitute lodgings were limited to those approved by the *Sittenpolizei*.

*Kontrollmädchen*, or registered prostitutes, could not live in close proximity to churches,

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<sup>47</sup> Marhoefer, “Degeneration, Sexual Freedom, and the Politics of the Weimar Republic,” 532.

<sup>48</sup> Julia Roos, *Weimar through the Lens of Gender: Prostitution Reform, Woman’s Emancipation, and German Democracy, 1919-1933* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Abraham Flexner, *Prostitution in Europe* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2007), 418-424.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

schools, institutions of higher learning, and government buildings.<sup>53</sup> The majority of German cities, however, developed a different method of housing known as *Kasernierung*.

Regulated prostitution was particularly severe in cities requiring official paperwork registering women as prostitutes. For example, registration in Berlin required an initial court sentence convicting the woman of professional prostitution.<sup>54</sup> Once convicted, the individual rights of the woman were restricted, with the loss of the right to due process, freedom of movement, or the ability to choose their home.<sup>55</sup> Women in Hamburg who were registered as prostitutes were divided into five, broad categories by the *Sittenspolizei*. As Roos explains, “The broadness of these categories illustrates the immense power of the police over lower-class women whose lifestyles did not conform to dominant notions of respectability. Once a woman had been registered as a professional prostitute, however, it was extremely difficult for her to return to a normal life.”<sup>56</sup>

The Law for Combating Venereal Disease not only abolished state-regulated prostitution, but also abolished the *Sittenspolizei*, and outlawed regulated brothels.<sup>57</sup> The law received support from a broad coalition including the Catholic Center Party, Bavarian People’s Party, and the German People’s Party.<sup>58</sup> In addition, the law introduced measures intended to curb the spread of STDs.<sup>59</sup> These measures included the end of the ban preventing advertising or display of contraceptives. After 1927 several cities installed vending machines for the purchase of condoms in public lavatories.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Roos, *Weimar through the Lens of Gender*, 17.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Roos, “Backlash against Prostitutes’ Rights,” 69-70.

<sup>58</sup> Roos, *Weimar through the Lens of Gender*, 2.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

## Criminality, Eugenics, and the Weimar Republic

Changes to the criminal justice system and scientific study created a connection between criminality and genetics integral to the Nazi movement towards mass extermination. A fundamental shift in the conception of crime occurred in the late nineteenth century and emphasized the criminal offender rather than the criminal offense. It is important to note that many Nazi laws were built on the foundation of Weimar policy related to criminality and imprisonment.<sup>61</sup> The acceptance and adoption of eugenic theory as scientific consensus opened the door for doctors to violate the Hippocratic Oath in the name of both scientific discovery as well as the 'greater good' of society. Interest in eugenics was not reserved to Nazi Germany. The eugenics movement truly began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and spread throughout the world. Simultaneous to the rise of eugenics was a reevaluation of the accepted social order and a push for criminal justice reform. As Richard J. Evans explains, "By the eve of the First World War, their ideas had spread in one form or another to areas such as medicine, social work, criminology, and the law. Social deviants such as prostitutes, alcoholics, petty thieves, vagrants and the like were increasingly regarded as hereditarily tainted, and calls amongst experts for such people to be forcibly sterilized had become too loud to escape attention."<sup>62</sup>

Movement towards the reform of the criminal justice and penal system began under the Weimar Republic. However, this was inspired by the earlier publication of several scholarly works such as *Marburger Programm* written by influential law school professor, Franz von Liszt. Published in 1882, Liszt called for the incapacitation of all 'habitual criminals,' which he estimated included at least half of all prisoners.<sup>63</sup> Criminal justice reform emphasized the

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<sup>61</sup> Wachsmann, "From Indefinite Confinement to Extermination," 167.

<sup>62</sup> Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 37.

<sup>63</sup> Wachsmann, "From Indefinite Confinement to Extermination," 167.

categorization of people by both behavior and contribution to society. As Evans explains, “Well before the end of the Weimar Republic, experts had seized the opportunity afforded by the financial crisis to argue that the best way to reduce the impossible burden of welfare on the economy was to prevent the underclass from reproducing, by subjecting them to forcible sterilization.”<sup>64</sup>

It is critical to acknowledge that security confinement was not fully implemented during the Weimar Republic. However, “security confinement was included in the final drafts of the proposed new Criminal Code under preparation in the second half of the 1920s.”<sup>65</sup> Even though the Criminal Code was not passed or implemented, the ideas surrounding this policy gained increased popular acceptance. As Evans concludes, “the Weimar welfare state had begun to turn to authoritarian solutions to this crisis that contemplated a serious assault on the bodily rights and integrity of the citizen.”<sup>66</sup> When the Nazi Party came to power and began to utilize security confinement, there was an established policy in place that received little pushback from the general public. By 1933, “not only was there widespread agreement that certain ‘habitual’ offenders had to be eliminated from society, but prison officials and criminologists had already taken the first steps in identifying who these offenders were.”<sup>67</sup>

At the end of the Weimar Republic, the social insecurities and growing economic crisis of the 1930s generated an intense attack on women. Those who feared for the morality of the nation believed that women were the source of German cultural degeneration and economic problems. These attacks became sustained and violent because “the new woman seemed to personify the Weimar spirit, and it is no surprise that the republic’s opponents blended together

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<sup>64</sup> Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 377.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Wachsmann, “From Indefinite Confinement to Extermination,” 169.

in their propaganda the image of the new woman with that of Jews and Bolsheviks. Sexually emancipated women, Jewish businessmen, communist revolutionaries – all rolled into one, the nightmare vision of the Right.”<sup>68</sup> The Weimar Republic did pass liberal legislation, brought new political ideas to a wider discussion, and had lofty goals to improve life for all of Germany. The modernity that the republic aimed to create was never realized and even their more liberal policies had limitations on individual rights. While advocating for sexual liberation, the Weimar republic could not leave sex within the private sphere; rather, sex required both a social and political purpose in order to be good. For conservatives, the Weimar Republic became synonymous with the “system” that lent Germany to foreign powers, destroyed the economy, opened the nation to Jews and promoted sexual degeneracy. The Nazi Party and others ultimately weaponized these sentiments to their benefit.

### **Nazi Party Exploitation of Weimar Era Movements**

Conservative backlash against the Weimar era encompassed all aspects of the sex reform movement. Hirschfeld’s *Institut* and its collection were specifically targeted by both the National Socialists German Students’ League and the Nazi Party due to their early medical research regarding sex and sexuality, homosexuality, and transgenderism. On May 6, 1933, members of the National Socialists German Students’ League marched into the *Institut* and proceeded to “pour red ink over books and manuscripts, played football with framed photographs, leaving the floor covered in shards of broken glass...”<sup>69</sup> Four days later Nazi Brownshirts arrived with baskets, which they used to gather books and manuscripts. These sources, including an estimated 10,000 books, were then transported to the Opera Square and set on fire.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 329.

<sup>69</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 375.

<sup>70</sup> Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 375-376.

Even exercise groups founded during the Weimar Republic developed militaristic traits later exploited by the Nazi Party.<sup>71</sup> The Nazis easily utilized the body culture surrounding exercise for their own purpose. Hans Surén himself was hired for the Reichswehr's physical activity programs and joined the Nazi Party in 1933. The Hitler Youth also emphasized the connection between masculinity, militarism, and nature.

Notably, the Nazi Party capitalized on the reaction of conservative Christians and religion to organize against the Weimar government. Despite viewing Christianity and the different churches as a distraction from allegiance to the state, the Nazi Party recognized the importance of the religious population as a means to achieve their goals. The Nazis instead generated propaganda calling for a return to morality, targeting prostitution, promiscuity, homosexuality, abortion, socialism, and bolshevism and made direct appeals to Christians.<sup>72</sup> For example, in a speech attempting to gather the support of Christians, Hitler stated, "The national government sees in both Christian denominations the most important factor for the maintenance of our society."<sup>73</sup>

The Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life "welcomed the removal of Jewish elements from Christian scripture and liturgy and the redefinition of Christianity as a Germanic, Aryan religion."<sup>74</sup> Hitler nominated pastor Ludwig Müller for the position of "Delegate and Plenipotentiary". The Delegate and Plenipotentiary acted as a diplomatic liaison between the government and the Protestant church, tasked with addressing any public image issues related to the Protestant Church.<sup>75</sup> With pressure from Nazi

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<sup>71</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 321.

<sup>72</sup> Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust*, 136.

<sup>73</sup> Hitler's speech on government policy before the Reichstag on March 23, 1933, *Dokumente der deutschen Politik und Geschichte von 1848 bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Johannes Hohlfeld (Berlin and Munich, n.d.), 4:29-36.

<sup>74</sup> Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologies and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>75</sup> Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust*, 134.

leadership Müller was ‘elected’ to the position in July 1933.<sup>76</sup> As the Reich Bishop, Müller helped to integrate German nationalism into Christianity through publications such as a “revised, Germanized version of the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ that transformed its gentle message into a militaristic, warrior-like tract.”<sup>77</sup> In Müller’s version Matthew 5:4-5 became, “Happy is he who bears his sufferings like a man; he will find the strength never to despair without courage. Happy is he who is always a good comrade; he will make his way in the world.”<sup>78 79</sup>

Inspired by the Weimar era discussion of criminality and genetics, the Nazi Party further developed and defined categories such as ‘habitual criminals’ and ‘asocials’. This link between criminal offense and genetics was utilized to justify indefinite incarceration, sterilization of criminals, and eventually mass extermination, for the greater good of ‘civilized society.’ The Nazis viewed habitual criminals as genetic threats due to the “degenerate traits” they might pass to their offspring.<sup>80</sup> These classifications provided a broad and sweeping justification for ‘reform’ such as indefinite incarceration, or ‘security confinement’. Prison officials and criminologists had already taken the first steps in identifying who these offenders were when the Nazi Party came to power.<sup>81</sup> Evans notes the simultaneous growth of the social welfare and criminal justice system with the erosion of liberties for certain demographics. He argues, “...health and welfare agencies, determined to create rational and scientifically informed ways of dealing with social deprivation, deviance and crime, with the ultimate aim of eliminating them from German society in generations to come, encouraged new policies that began to eat away at

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*, 53.

<sup>78</sup> Ludwig Müller, *Deutsche Gottesworte: Aus der Bergpredigt verdeutscht von Reichsbischof Ludwig Müller* (Weimar: Verlag Deutsche Christen, 1936).

<sup>79</sup> Matthew 5:4-5 (ESV): “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

<sup>80</sup> Waschmann, “From Indefinite Confinement to Extermination,” 168.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 169.

the civil liberties of the poor and the handicapped...The belief that heredity played some part in many kinds of social deviance...hardened into a dogma.”<sup>82</sup>

The Law Against Dangerous Habitual Criminals introduced on November 24, 1933 created the category of prisoner *Sichweunungsverwahrte*. The courts now had the ability to order the indefinite imprisonment of repeat offenders at the end of their official sentencing.<sup>83</sup> The Nazis first targeted those who were physically or mentally handicapped for incarceration and forced sterilization, and later for execution. The Reich Propaganda Office distributed posters advocating for both compulsory sterilization and euthanasia of those with hereditary diseases.<sup>84</sup> The Nazis gradually implemented euthanasia programs without much public backlash through their appeals to nationalism and propaganda emphasizing the cost to support those with mental and physical handicaps.<sup>85</sup> The eugenics movement in Nazi Germany was substantially motivated by racism. As Yehuda Bauer states, “Nineteenth-century racism, that is, the superiority of one race over another, was appropriately congruent with Nazi ideology.”<sup>86</sup> The implementation of inferior and superior social and racial classes coupled with the acceptance that the death of certain people would be a net positive for society as a whole, directly aided the mass murder of the Holocaust. As Carol Rittner and John K. Roth explain, “...racism’s ‘logic’ ultimately entails genocide. For if you take seriously the idea that one race endangers the well-being of one another, the only way to remove that menace completely is to do away once and for all, with everyone and everything that embodies it.”<sup>87</sup> Eugenic theories and racism targeted

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<sup>82</sup> Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 143.

<sup>83</sup> Waschmann, "From Indefinite Confinement to Extermination," 166.

<sup>84</sup> "Propaganda Slide for Compulsory Sterilization," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/propaganda-slide-for-compulsory-sterilization>.

<sup>85</sup> "Propaganda Slide Showing the Opportunity Cost of Feeding a Person with a Hereditary Disease," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/propaganda-slide-showing-the-opportunity-cost-of-feeding-a-person-with-a-hereditary-disease>.

<sup>86</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1982), 90.

<sup>87</sup> Rittner and Roth, eds., *Women and the Holocaust*, 2.

women specifically due to their ability to procreate. Rittner and Roth articulate this intrinsic connection stating, “whenever claims are made that one race is superior to any or all others, discrimination directed at women is unlikely far behind. Because women are the ones who bear children, they are put uniquely at risk as members of a group targeted as racially inferior.”<sup>88</sup>

### **Policies Regarding Sexuality and Prostitution in the Third Reich**

The issue of promiscuity in Germany was a major concern for the politically conservative and religious. Courting the support of Protestant and Catholic Christians, the National Socialists developed a platform to restore morality by the denunciation of promiscuity. Some overlap exists between the Nazi effort to curb promiscuity and their effort to end prostitution. However, the Nazi Party was able to separate these two issues of morality on the basis that promiscuity occurred without a financial transaction. Thus all prostitutes, and the men who paid them, were sexually promiscuous, but not everyone who engaged in sexual promiscuity was, or paid for, a prostitute.

Propaganda combatting promiscuity in the Third Reich was contradictory in regards to both race and gender. The Nazi Party portrayed promiscuity as a Jewish invention of moral corruption intended to weaken Germany as a nation. Antisemitic political cartoons such as the October 1937 cover of *Der Stürmer* depicted Jewish men as the devil threatening Mother Europe.<sup>89</sup> As Julia Roos explains, “the Nazis accused Jews and ‘Marxists’ of being the primary beneficiaries of prostitution and the spread of STDS.”<sup>90</sup> In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler describes STDs and the failure of the Weimar Republic to slow their spread as “the sickening of the body is only the consequence of a sickening of the moral, social, and racial instincts...”<sup>91</sup> At the same time

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Julius Streicher, *Der Stürmer: Deutsches Wochenblatt zum Kampfe und die Wahrheit*, October 1937.

<sup>90</sup> Roos, “Backlash against Prostitutes’ Rights,” 79.

<sup>91</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1981), 255-256.

that the Nazis claimed sexual promiscuity was meant to weaken the racially pure, they publicly advocated for and encouraged premarital and extramarital sexual relations among Aryans. By condemning promiscuity for the undesirable races, the Nazis could curb undesirable birthrates while encouraging promiscuous behavior in order to strengthen the *Volk* and increase the Aryan population. Leila Rupp explains, “Hitler urged women, within their domestic sphere, to bear numerous children in accordance with Nazi population policy... The theme of childbirth as an analogue of battle was a popular one in Nazi ideology.”<sup>92</sup> In one speech Hitler said, “Every child that a woman brings into the world is a battle, a battle waged for the existence of her people.”<sup>93</sup> In another speech, Hitler refuted the idea that relegating women to the home was debasing. He said, “When our opponents say: You degrade women by assigning them no other task than that of childbearing, then I answer that it is not degrading to a woman to be a mother. On the contrary, it is her greatest honor. There is nothing nobler for a woman than to be the mother of the sons and daughters of the people.”<sup>94</sup>

The intensely homophobic views of the Nazi Party and the policies of Heinrich Himmler also influenced the Nazi view of male sexuality. Himmler believed that limiting male sexuality either in marriage or while on the battlefield led directly to homosexual behavior. In a speech before SS commanders, Himmler explained, “One cannot prevent the entire youth from drifting toward homosexuality if at the same time one blocks all the alternatives. That is madness. After all, every barred opportunity to get together with girls in the big cities – even if it is for money –

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<sup>92</sup> Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 17.

<sup>93</sup> Adolf Hitler, “Die völkische Sendung,” 11.

<sup>94</sup> Adolf Hitler, in *Das deutsche Landfrauenbuch*, ed. Anne Marie Koeppen (Berlin: Reichsnährstand Verlag, 1937).

will motivate a large contingent to join the other side.”<sup>95</sup> There was a prevailing ideology that men who were not properly expending their natural sexual desire with women, would be more easily seduced by a homosexual. This became especially obvious in male dominated spheres such as youth movements and the military.<sup>96</sup>

The Nazi Party altered the laws surrounding male homosexuality to be much more ambiguous and open to interpretation. This allowed police officers to determine whether or not a specific action was or was not homosexual and even allowed local court systems to apply this interpretation of the law retroactively.<sup>97</sup> Both the Nazis and the police held soldiers engaging in ‘sexual horseplay’ to these expectations. Sexual contact which were once harmless pranks now resulted in court cases and prison sentences for members of the military.<sup>98</sup> The views of male sexuality stemming from homophobia later influenced the Nazi’s policies on prostitution. The Nazi Party eventually condoned and sanctioned military brothels, effectively facilitating prostitution, as a measure to curb homosexual acts among soldiers.

While men were encouraged to engage in sexual activities with multiple racially acceptable female partners, female sexuality was relegated to the private sphere and linked exclusively to reproduction. Propaganda targeted towards the ‘racially pure’ German women emphasized their duty as a homemaker and mother. The Nazis distributed photos of kindergartens filled with German infants and images of a woman breastfeeding her newborn to

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<sup>95</sup> Himmler’s speech before SS commanders on February 18, 1937, reprinted in excerpts in Heinrich Himmler, *Geheimreden 1933 bis 1945 und andere Ansprachen*, ed. Bradley F. Smith and Agnes F. Peterson (Ludwigsburg, 1974), 93-104, 98.

<sup>96</sup> Wachsmann, "From Indefinite Confinement to Extermination," 236.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 246-247

encourage the nurturing role of women as a service to the state.<sup>99</sup> <sup>100</sup> The Nazi Party portrayed promiscuous women as sexual deviants or “potential prostitutes” and could be institutionalized for behavior indicating that they may become a prostitute in the future.<sup>101</sup> In practice there were some exceptions to this propaganda. For example, in 1934 the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (Federation of German Girls), received a directive to encourage the young girls to engage in premarital sex.<sup>102</sup>

Propaganda depicted the idyllic German woman as strong and healthy. Rupp explains that “the ideal German woman was not frail and helpless, but strong, vigorous, athletic, able to do hard physical work if her labor were needed by the state.”<sup>103</sup> Women were expected not only to birth children but to raise and educate them to be good citizens of the *Volk*. As Annette Timm explains, “femininity would then be appreciated for its relationship to motherhood rather than to sex.”<sup>104</sup> A cartoon featured in the July 1936 issue of *Der Stürmer* titled “Unfruitful” depicts a nun in her habit beside a clergyman to the left and a Jewish man with a scantily clad woman drinking and smoking to the right. The caption reads, “She belongs to the church, she belongs to Satan. Both are lost to the German race.”<sup>105</sup> The nun and her vows of celibacy, as well as her commitment to the church, prevented her from supporting the German race through motherhood. The other woman is “lost” due to her relationship with a Jewish man.

A second area of major contradiction within Nazi propaganda and policy was the issue of pornography. Pornography had been widely denounced by both political conservatives and

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<sup>99</sup> “German Propaganda About the Role of Women,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/german-propaganda-about-the-role-of-women>.

<sup>100</sup> “Nazi Propaganda Ideal of Motherhood,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/nazi-propaganda-ideal-of-motherhood>.

<sup>101</sup> Roos, *Weimar through the Lens of Gender*, 19.

<sup>102</sup> Herzog, *Sex after Fascism*, 28.

<sup>103</sup> Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War*, 45.

<sup>104</sup> Wachsmann, “From Indefinite Confinement to Extermination,” 194.

<sup>105</sup> *Der Stürmer*, “Unfruitful,” July 1936 no. 20.

religious conservatives during the Weimar Republic. Media including nudity and graphic depictions of sexuality were regularly on display in magazines, movies, and advertisements throughout Germany.<sup>106</sup> During the Third Reich, opponents of lewdness often connected the existence of this media to the liberal democracy of the Weimar Republic despite the fact that the media had existed prior to the Weimar Republic as well. By linking pornography and sexual imagery to a liberal government, conservatives were able to denounce the images as both Jewish and Marxist attempts to corrupt German society with the erosion of conservative values and the rise of ‘sexual Bolshevism’ or ‘Judeo-Bolshevism’.<sup>107</sup> As Dagmar Herzog argues, “the idea of Jews as the main advocates of sexual liberation was also a racist, right-wing construct...and, in fact, became central to the Nazis’ retrospective representation of the Weimar Republic as a whole. Weimar was reduced to sex.”<sup>108</sup>

The destruction of widespread sexual imagery became another tenet of the Nazi aim to restore moral purity to Germany. Conservatives, especially Christian conservatives, believed that the Third Reich would uphold this platform and remove all images of public nudity in art and prevent the publication of new printed material containing pornographic depictions. While the Nazi Party joined the conservatives in labeling pornography as Jewish or Marxist in design, the Third Reich did not remove these images from the public. Instead, the Nazi Party began to install public depictions of pornography which conformed to the ideal *Volk*. The government erected statues in parks and squares depicting Germany as a nude woman, magazines included nude

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>107</sup> Herzog, *Sex after Fascism*, 22.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 20.

photographs of healthy women, and pornographic images including issues of *Der Stürmer* in public display cases, were instrumental in the spread of antisemitism.<sup>109 110</sup>

The frequent use of women in pornographic imagery further indicated the division of gender within Germany under the Third Reich. Images in magazines displaying Aryan women exercising containing nudity were deemed acceptable and idealized within the Third Reich while images of women who were scantily clad, but still clothed were denounced as pornographic. The October 20, 1938 edition of *Das Schwarze Korps* included a two-page spread effectively demonstrating this division of gender. The left-hand page shows four photos of nude German women outdoors under the label “Schon und Rein” (“Beautiful and Pure”). The right-hand page shows six photos of scantily-clad women in burlesque costumes under the label “Geschäft ohne Schan” (“Shameless Business”).<sup>111</sup>

Propaganda, encouraging antisemitic attitudes, capitalized on the nude female form. Jewish men were frequently depicted sexually violating women representative of Germany. The anti-Semitic Nazi journal *Der Stürmer* frequently included “luxuriantly detailed descriptions of sex crimes and many pictures of naked blondes defiled by big-nosed Jews...*Der Stürmer* served as pornography.”<sup>112</sup> *Der Stürmer* issue 37, published in August 1935, features a cartoon titled *Legion der Schande (Legion of Shame)* which depicts a grotesque depiction of a Jewish man showering a group of German women with coins. To the right, a topless woman sits with her head down in shame. The caption accompanying this cartoon read, “Ignorant, lured by gold.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>110</sup> “German Boys Read an Issue of Der Stuermer Newspaper,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/german-boys-read-an-issue-of-der-stuermer-newspaper>. “Public Posting of the Antisemitic Newspaper ‘Der Stuermer’ (The Attacker),” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/public-posting-of-the-antisemitic-newspaper-der-stuermer-the-attacker>.

<sup>111</sup> *Das Schwarze Korps*, October 20, 1938, 10-12.

<sup>112</sup> Herzog, *Sex after Fascism*, 40.

They stand disgraced in Judah's fold. Souls poisoned, blood infected, Disaster broods in their wombs."<sup>113</sup>

The issue of prostitution is perhaps the most contradictory within Nazi propaganda and policy. The concept of prostitution itself was based on an inherent paradox. As Jill Suzette Smith explains, "[Prostitutes] can represent both the affirmation and the subversion of social structures. As public women who sell their bodies in a market dominated by male buyers, prostitutes seem to reinforce patriarchal capitalism..."<sup>114</sup> Prostitution was also more complex due to the lengthy debate and policy surrounding its function in Germany. The Nazi Party not only called for the eradication of independent, decriminalized prostitution, but the end of state-regulated prostitution. Timm provides further context stating, "Early pronouncements against the scourge of prostitution, emanating from Adolf Hitler himself, misled anti-prostitution activists into assuming that the new regime would not tolerate such forms of extramarital sexual activity."<sup>115</sup> Hitler directly attacked prostitution as an explanation for the decline of Germany in *Mein Kampf*.<sup>116</sup> Referencing the spread of syphilis, Hitler attributed the primary cause as "...our prostitution of love. The mixing of blood (mixing of races) through prostitution is the corruption. Even if it did not result in this disease of nature, it would still damage the people morally."<sup>117</sup> These misleading statements were intentional to garner political support from those who opposed prostitution in all its forms.

At the beginning of its power, the Third Reich passed ambiguous laws criminalizing prostitution and expanding the scope of potential sentences against those committing such

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<sup>113</sup> *Der Stürmer*, "Legion of Shame," August 1935 no. 37.

<sup>114</sup> Jill Suzanne Smith, *Berlin Coquette: Prostitution and the New German Woman, 1890-1933* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>115</sup> Wachsmann, "From Indefinite Confinement to Extermination," 194.

<sup>116</sup> Roos, "Backlash against Prostitutes' Rights," 67.

<sup>117</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 160.

crimes. For example, the Nazis amended the Law against Sexually Transmitted Diseases originally passed in 1927 during the Weimar Republic. This amendment “not only recriminalized prostitution, effectively legalized in 1927, but also reintroduced the legal ban on publicity and education relating to abortion and abortifacients.”<sup>118</sup> What is especially interesting regarding these laws is the effect that they had on women who were not prostitutes. Regulated prostitution policy designated several areas throughout the city prohibited to prostitutes. These forbidden zones generally coincided with the major public spaces. Within them *all* single women were at risk of being suspected of and arrested for street soliciting.<sup>119</sup> The Nazi Party effectively relegated women to the ideal private sphere of the home by threatening them with the potential loss of personal right if arrested.<sup>120</sup> As Timm explains, “[Female] sexuality was inextricably linked to motherhood and their sole public function was to act as educator and spiritual guides to their families...like ‘respectable’ women, prostitutes were also prevented from expressing sexuality in public...their sexual services were also subjected to the demands of the state.”<sup>121</sup> Following the Nazi establishment of military and camp brothels, prostitutes were now required to serve the state through forced prostitution.

By 1936 the Military Supreme Command stated that the construction of military brothels was an “urgent necessity.”<sup>122</sup> Himmler acted similarly based on his personal fears of homosexual activity within the military and called for the establishment of military brothels in 1937. Timm explains, “Himmler seemed particularly concerned that removing prostitution as an outlet for

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<sup>118</sup> Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 376.

<sup>119</sup> Roos, *Weimar through the Lens of Gender*, 25.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Wachsmann, "From Indefinite Confinement to Extermination," 201.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

excess male sexual drives would be injurious to soldiers and might lead to an increased incidence of homosexuality.”<sup>123</sup>

While publicly advocating for an end to all sexual immorality and prostitution during their rise to power, the Nazi Party passed legislation which effectively restored regulationism or state-regulated prostitution. Brothels were not only established in military camps, but also in camps for foreign workers. The establishment of brothels in working camps was a measure intended to preserve racial purity as well as incentivize hard work. These brothels were filled with foreign women so that Aryan women would not be “defiled” by the male workers.<sup>124</sup> The men who worked the hardest and met certain quotas were able to utilize the brothel services. Notably, the Nazi Party later established brothels within several concentration camps with the same idea of incentivizing hard work.

Nazi propaganda and policy regarding prostitution highlighted a dramatic dichotomy between men and women. Despite the fact that male customers perpetuated prostitution with their demands for services, Nazi propaganda and policy focused almost exclusively on the sexual deviancy and criminality of the female prostitute.<sup>125</sup> The women were described as sexually deviant with a genetic disposition towards prostitution, while the men participating in prostitution were seen as expending natural male sexual energies. This propaganda enforced the idea that the female prostitute could not properly contribute to the *Volk* because she shunned motherhood and feared pregnancy. Women who were not prostitutes served the state by

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 200.

remaining in the home and having and raising children. Female prostitutes were required to serve the state confined from public life within brothels.<sup>126</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The conservative reaction to the Weimar Republic, or “the feeling that order and discipline had been swept away by the Revolution, and that moral and sexual degeneracy were taking over society,” allowed for the arrest, persecution, exploitation, and imprisonment of women.<sup>127</sup> Increasingly popular eugenic theory and its application to the criminal justice system, established a connection between criminality and genetics. The Nazis exploited the popularity of this scientific movement in order to target specific groups of people deemed ‘inferior’. Women targeted by race laws were not only incarcerated at Ravensbrück, but also subjected to forced sterilizations as a result of the eugenics movement and the Final Solution. Women categorized as asocials under new criminal classifications and laws, included prostitutes, lesbians, and criminals were eventually transported to concentration camps such as Ravensbrück. The Nazi perception of female sexuality demonstrates the conflicting application of law and an intrinsic connection between female sexuality and motherhood. While German men and women were encouraged to engage in promiscuous behavior in order to increase the Aryan birthrate, people deemed less desirable were prevented from expressing their sexuality, engaging in promiscuous activities, and eventually from having children through forced abortions and sterilizations. While women were arrested for prostitution and incarcerated for their crime, the Nazis often then forced these women into state-regulated prostitution. Examining the Weimar Republic and the subsequent

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<sup>126</sup> Chris Bundock, “Spending Time in the Third Reich – Or, Himmler Goes to Camp: Eroticism’s Ideological Appropriation and the Soldier’s ‘Sovereignty’,” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 7, no. 2 (2006): 60.

<sup>127</sup> Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 126.

Nazi backlash demonstrates the stepping stones for the Holocaust in general, as well as the imprisonment of the women eventually incarcerated in Ravensbrück.

## Chapter Two

The Ravensbrück concentration camp for women serves as an effective, yet by no means exhaustive, case study for the issue of sexual violence against women during the Holocaust. Ravensbrück was primarily intended as a detention center for exclusively female political prisoners, religious dissidents, criminals, and those categorized as ‘asocials’ by the Nazi government.<sup>1</sup> Ravensbrück is a compelling case study not only for its focus on women, but because of its limited historiography, as discussed in the Introduction. Regardless of the circumstances or reasoning behind the limited and delayed investigation into Ravensbrück, examining the sole concentration camp for women is necessary to developing a more thorough and complete understanding of the Holocaust and its impact specifically on women.

### Construction

Following the Nazi rise to power and the ensuing mass arrests, women were first held in regular jails. In April 1933, a state workhouse located at Moringen-Solling in Prussian Hanover was converted into a detention center exclusively for women.<sup>2</sup> However, in late 1937 the Nazis opened a second camp for women located at Lichtenburg in Saxony. This camp essentially replaced Moringen which was closed in early 1938.<sup>3</sup> Approximately 1,350 women were held at Moringen between 1933 and 1938.<sup>4</sup> While Moringen was not run by the SS directly and the majority of prisoners were members of the Communist Party, Lichtenburg by contrast, was managed by the SS and female overseers. Lichtenburg also housed asocials and religious dissidents in addition to political opponents. Originally a castle, Lichtenburg was quickly overwhelmed by the dramatic influx of female prisoners arrested and transported from

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<sup>1</sup> Megargee, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 1,188.

<sup>2</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Megargee, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 128.

Moringen.<sup>5</sup> Originally intended to house just 600 female prisoners, around 1,400 women were held in Lichtenburg.<sup>6</sup> Beginning in May 1939, between 900 and 950 women were transported from Lichtenburg to Ravensbrück.<sup>7</sup>

More than 20,000 social outcasts had been imprisoned and designated for concentration camps as of 1938. By this time, Moringen and the other female prisons were overcrowded and war was imminent. Heinrich Himmler proposed a concentration camp for women later that year. Senior SS administrator Gruppenführer Oswald Pohl suggested a site on Mecklenberg Lake near a village known as Ravensbrück as a viable location. The German government had purchased this land in 1934, and the SS expanded it with purchases in 1938. This land was located in a secluded area, separated from the nearby townspeople by a lake and river. While secluded, the camp was near a rail connection to Berlin and a system of lakes connected by canals allowed for the transportation of goods.<sup>8</sup> The main camp known as Ravensbrück was merely the central portion of what became an extensive camp system. The camp itself was constructed beginning in late 1938 using roughly five hundred male slave laborers from the nearby Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

### **Organization and Staff**

Ravensbrück was operated by an elaborate set of hierarchies including SS leadership and prisoner divisions. At the top of the hierarchy was *Kommandant SS Hauptsturmführer* Max Koegel. Koegel had previously worked as the director of the Lichtenburg Castle detention center. After 1942, Koegel was succeeded by *SS Hauptsturmführer* Fritz Suhren who worked as

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<sup>5</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Megargee, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 121.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 16.

commandant until the end of the war.<sup>9</sup> The Ravensbrück commandant was not only in charge of the daily performance of the camp, but also oversaw enforcement and punishment of both prisoners and staff. Following the standard SS hierarchy of the other concentration camps, Ravensbrück consisted of five major offices. Underneath the office of the commandant was the Camp Leader for Protective Custody, the Political Department, the Administrative Office, and the office of Camp Doctor.<sup>10</sup> The Camp Leader (*Schutzhaftlagerführer* or simply *Lagerführer*) was charged with dealing with prisoners. Importantly, this office controlled prisoner labor through the *Arbeitseinsatz* (Labor Squads) as well as the *Oberaufseherin* (Head Female Overseer). The Head Female Overseer was directly in charge of all overseers within the camp. These overseers were typically also female and interacted closely with the prisoners.

The Political Department was somewhat independent of the other four offices as it was tied to the Gestapo. This department monitored and recorded incoming and outgoing prisoners and was charged with the categorization of inmates. Due to their connection with the Gestapo, the Political Department was able to launch its own internal investigations on prisoners, camp conditions, and fellow SS personnel. The Administrative Office directed both provisions and finances. This office controlled the physical aspect of the camp and was in charge of renovations, expansions, and construction of additional buildings. Personnel records of prisoners and female overseers were also managed by the Administrative Office. Lastly, the *Standortarzt* (Garrison Doctor) was placed in charge of the office of Camp Doctor. This office supervised the infirmary and played a direct role in the medical experimentation performed on prisoners and controlled the selections determining the fate and work assignments of inmates. While inmates performed

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>10</sup> Ino Arndt, "Das Frauens Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück," *Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag* (1970): 102-103.

the majority of the labor to run the camp, non-prisoners, typically members of the *Waffen SS* worked as drivers and guards and were housed in barracks outside of the camp.<sup>11</sup>

Much like the prisoners, the overseers of Ravensbrück were exclusively female. While the camp was run by the SS, the female overseers belonged to the SS Women's Auxiliary or *weibliche SS-Gefolge*. The majority of these overseers were young German women from ordinary families with relatively little formal education. Some overseers were conscripted for the work, while others joined seeing the job as an opportunity.<sup>12</sup> Conscription for overseer work became increasingly more common by 1943.<sup>13</sup> Notably, employment with the SS did pay a substantial amount more than other unskilled jobs available to women at the time. After 1942 Ravensbrück became the main training location for all female overseers. Training included theoretical instruction such as how to detect work slowdowns, but also involved assisting fully trained overseers on duty at Ravensbrück. Upon completion of the standard training these overseers could be sent to any concentration camp or subcamp.<sup>14</sup>

The overseers of Ravensbrück dressed in uniform with a black cape. Gemma LaGuardia Gluck, the sister of New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and a political prisoner held at Ravensbrück, explains in her memoir that overseers were nicknamed “the ‘ravens’ of Ravensbrück...because of the black capes they wore.”<sup>15</sup> Overseers generally treated prisoners in a harsh manner, both verbally and physically. Training encouraged these behaviors and leadership within the camps reinforced them. As Judith Buber Agassi notes, “They were trained in treating the prisoners to a constant barrage of foul language and threats, to blows to face, head,

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<sup>11</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Gemma LaGuardia Gluck, *Fiorello's Sister: Incorporating My Story* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1961), 51.

and body by using fists or truncheons, to kicking them with their booted feet, or to setting their dogs at the prisoners to bite their legs.”<sup>16</sup> The SS viewed overseers who were willing to use physical violence against prisoners favorably and often rewarded them with promotions.<sup>17</sup>

The chief superintendent, Dorothea Binz, was particularly notorious amongst prisoners. As Gemma LaGuardia Gluck reflects, “She had a well-deserved reputation for bestiality, for which she paid the penalty on the gallows in 1947.”<sup>18</sup> Memoirs and survivor testimonies attest to the abuse prisoners received at the hands of the staff overseers. Cornelia ten Boom, a Dutch political prisoner, describes a guard mocking Betsie, her sister, for her inability to lift a shovelful of dirt. When Betsie joked about her effort, “the guard’s plump cheeks went crimson. ‘I’ll decide who’s to stop!’ And snatching the leather crop from her belt she slashed Betsie across the chest and neck.”<sup>19</sup> Francis Pitard recorded the memoir of his great-aunt Charlotte Aline Virmoux, a member of the French resistance imprisoned at Ravensbrück. In this memoir Pitard relates her experience with such an attack. An overseer approached Aline with her dog and “ordered the dog to attack Aline’s extremities. For five minutes, Aline uselessly struggled with the dog as it savagely bit her feet and her hands.”<sup>20</sup> French political prisoner and niece of Charles de Gaulle, Geneviève de Gaulle Anthonioz, reflects on the constant fear of death in her memoir *The Dawn of Hope*, “I’m ashamed to confess, but I *am* afraid, afraid of those moments that will mark the end of my life. But isn’t that the only way not to be alone any longer – by sharing the anguish of

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<sup>16</sup> Agassi, *Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Gluck, *Fiorello’s Sister: Incorporating My Story*, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (Washington Depot, CT: Chosen Books, 1971), 186.

<sup>20</sup> Francis Pitard, *From Normandy to the Hell of Ravensbrück: Life and Escape from a Concentration Camp* (New York, NY: Page Publishing, Inc., 2016), 94.

those who, like me, are destined to die today? Massacred by the blows of a pickax bitten by dogs thrown into ditches like dirt or refuse. I have seen it with my own eyes...”<sup>21</sup>

Specific overseers became notorious amongst the prisoners for their cruelty. Corrie ten Boom references a woman nicknamed “The Snake” several times in her memoir. She describes watching the overseer beat another prisoner during roll call: “One dark morning when ice was forming a halo around each street lamp a feeble-minded girl two rows ahead of us suddenly soiled herself. A guard rushed at her, swinging her thick leather crop while the girl shrieked in pain and terror...It was the guard we had nicknamed ‘The Snake’ because of the shiny dress she wore.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Subcamps, Work Assignments, and General Function**

Sub-camps of Ravensbrück radiated out from the main camp stretching from Austria to the Baltic Sea.<sup>23</sup> While there is no absolute list of subcamps, the average estimate falls between 40 and 50 subcamps.<sup>24</sup> The Ravensbrück memorial’s official exhibition catalogue includes a list of 44 subcamps and 12 external work details.<sup>25</sup> These subcamps functioned in the same manner as Ravensbrück, although not all of the subcamps were under the direct control of the SS. Micheline Maurel, a member of the French resistance, was arrested in 1943 and transported to the subcamp of Neubrandenburg after processing and examination at Ravensbrück. Neubrandenburg functioned primarily as a work camp with prisoners supplying forced labor for a neighboring airplane plant. Maurel describes this work, “For three months I worked at the airplane plant. The opaque panes of the workroom hid the sky. The days were endless. It was

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<sup>21</sup> Geneviève de Gaulle, *The Dawn of Hope: A Memoir of Ravensbrück* (New York, NY: Arcade Publishing Inc., 1999), 8.

<sup>22</sup> ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, 190.

<sup>23</sup> Alyn Bessmann and Insa Eschebach (eds), *The Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp: History and Memory* (Berlin: Metropol, 2013), 188-189.

<sup>24</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 207-209.

<sup>25</sup> Bessmann and Eschebach, *The Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp*, 188-189.

there that I learned the meaning of tedium for the first time. We were put to work soldering small springs; rumor had it that they were from bomb releases.”<sup>26</sup>

While the main camp of Ravensbrück was intended to function as a detention center rather than a work camp, as the number of women arrested increased, forced labor became increasingly important to the camp structure. Prison labor helped to sustain the German economy during the war. The inmates of Ravensbrück were forced to work for companies such as the Waffen SS clothing factory, the German Laboratory for Nutrition and Food, German Equipment Works, The Textile and Leather Processing Company, and the Siemens & Halske Company.<sup>27</sup> Labor at these companies included farming, sewing, weaving, knitting, winding coils, and producing microphones, telephones, and small electronics. Prisoner labor in mines, mills, and factories helped to sustain companies through the war and generated a substantial profit for the German industrialist owners.<sup>28</sup>

Companies such as the Allgemeine Electricitäts-Gesellschaft (AEG), Telefunken, and Siemens were well-known electric companies prior to the Nazi rise to power. The directors of these companies developed a partnership with the SS utilizing prisoner labor from Auschwitz, Ravensbrück, Dachau, and Mauthausen.<sup>29</sup> Despite these profits and the many criminal trials at the end of the war, these companies were not required to compensate the survivors. As Benjamin B. Ferencz explains in *Less Than Slaves*, “the German government refused to make any payment for the work performed for private German companies, or for the pain and suffering connected with such labor. There was thus a gap in the legislative program.”<sup>30</sup> SS Lieutenant General Pohl

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<sup>26</sup> Micheline Maurel, *An Ordinary Camp* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1958), 10.

<sup>27</sup> Bessmann and Eschebach, *The Ravensbrück Women's Concentration Camp*, 180.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin B. Ferencz, *Less Than Slaves: Jewish Forced Labor and the Quest for Compensation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), xvii.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvii.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, xxv.

wrote Heinrich Himmler explaining that Siemens was in the midst of building additional barracks for the female inmates who would be used to assemble telecommunications equipment.<sup>31</sup> By fall of 1942 Siemens had not only a large factory, but also at least twenty barracks equipped with machines for production. The women of Ravensbrück participated in an aptitude test examining their eyesight and finger dexterity prior to their selection for work by Siemens.<sup>32</sup> Lawsuits in the early 1960s against Siemens by the few survivors resulted in the disbursement of DM 7,184,100. As Ferencz concludes, “for their services, their pain, and their suffering, they each received no more than DM 3,300 – the equivalent of \$825.”<sup>33</sup>

A notable subcamp of Ravensbrück was Uckermark. Located only a kilometer from the main camp, Uckermark was designated as a Youth Camp for children roughly between the ages of 8 and 16. These girls were not categorized into different groups upon their arrival and were as diverse as their counterparts in the main camp. However, most children held in Uckermark could be classified as “asocials”.<sup>34</sup> Many children were arrested for sexual promiscuity typically involving German soldiers or foreigners. Of the first 500 girls registered at Uckermark, 220 were recorded as having venereal disease.<sup>35</sup> The ideas of habitual criminality and asocial persons were largely accepted not only in popular thought but also within the realm of social work and healthcare. Welfare authorities referred a large number of girls to be imprisoned in Uckermark. While the camp was advertised as a rehabilitation center for wayward children, there was little emphasis on rehabilitation, and the camp mainly served to separate these girls from “decent” society.<sup>36</sup> When Uckermark closed in 1944 the remaining children held there were transferred to

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>34</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 46.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

the Ravensbrück main camp.<sup>37</sup> In January 1945, the empty subcamp became the location of mass killings of old, sick, and weak prisoners known as a 'death zone'.<sup>38</sup>

Notably, Ravensbrück did carry out selections and executions using gas chambers. During its first few years in existence, the camp utilized the gas chamber located at the nearby Bernburg sanatorium. Ravensbrück inmates were selected as part of the "14f13" euthanasia program to exterminate the mentally ill and those who were unable to work beginning in 1942.<sup>39</sup> These prisoners were transported to Bernburg where they were killed using carbon monoxide poisoning.<sup>40</sup> The bodies of prisoners who died at Ravensbrück in the early years were placed into handmade coffins with a tag. Beginning in the spring of 1942, "the SS sent around 1,600 female prisoners and 300 male prisoners to their deaths at Bernberg. Around half of these prisoners were Jewish, at least 25 were Roma, and at least 13 were Jehovah's Witnesses."<sup>41</sup> Some early prisoners were cremated and buried in urns in the nearby Fürstenberg cemetery. The majority of prisoner remains were poured into a hole on the cemetery grounds and covered. However, in late 1943 the SS constructed a crematorium just outside of the camp for their own use. With a crematorium exclusively for Ravensbrück, the ashes of prisoners were disposed of within the camp. These ashes were not buried properly and were oftentimes thrown into the lake or scattered in fields. In early 1945, the SS built a gas chamber near the crematorium. Between 5,000 and 6,000 prisoners were killed in the gas chamber before liberation.<sup>42</sup> In total, between 20,000 and 30,000 prisoners died in Ravensbrück.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>38</sup> Megargee, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 1,190.

<sup>39</sup> Bessmann and Eschebach, *The Ravensbrück Women's Concentration Camp*, 240.

<sup>40</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 245.

<sup>41</sup> "Ravensbrück," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ravensbrueck>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

### **Prisoner Demographics and Categorizations**

The first group of female prisoners arrived at Ravensbrück in 1939 and after the first week, there were 974 women there. Sarah Helm specifies, “Of these, 114 women wore red triangles (political prisoners); 388 Jehovah’s Witnesses wore lilac; 119 wore green (habitual criminals); 240 wore black (asocials); 137 wore yellow (Jews) and some of the categories overlapped.”<sup>44</sup> According to surviving records, by the end of the war women from roughly 30 different nations, including the United States, were held at Ravensbrück.<sup>45</sup> The greatest numbers of prisoners came from, “Poland (36%), Soviet Union (21%), the German Reich (18% including Austria), Hungary (8%), France (6%), Czechoslovakia (3%), the Benelux countries (2%), and Yugoslavia (2%).”<sup>46</sup> Determining accurate prisoner statistics at the end of the war is especially difficult because of the deliberate destruction of camp records and the arrival of prisoners on death marches from other camps.

### **Political Prisoners**

Political prisoners consisted mainly of German anti-fascists. However, those in political opposition to the Nazi Party encompassed diverse ideological beliefs, such as socialists, Social Democrats, and communists. The political prisoners of Ravensbrück included German, Polish, French, Dutch, Soviet, and British antifascists and spies. These women had been arrested for a variety of crimes, including helping Jews, publishing antifascist materials, spying for the Allies, participating in illegal political parties, or other forms of organized resistance. For example, Cécile Ries, a teacher from Mersch in Luxembourg, was sent to Ravensbrück for having “an anti-Germanic attitude” and “subversion of the population”. Among her offenses was refusing to

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<sup>44</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 27.

<sup>45</sup> “Ravensbrück,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ravensbrueck>.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

hang a picture of Hitler in her classroom.<sup>47</sup> Other political prisoners such as Nanda Herbermann were arrested and held captive for suspicious activity. Herbermann worked as the assistant to Father Friedrich Muckermann, the editor of *Der Gral*. Muckermann openly opposed the Nazi Party and was forced to flee to Holland upon its rise to power. Herbermann traveled to Holland on multiple occasions throughout 1934 and 1935 in order to bring Muckermann some of his clothing and books he had left behind. These trips to Holland were considered suspicious activity and resulted in her arrest.<sup>48</sup>

Polish political prisoners housed at Ravensbrück were the largest group of political prisoners, making up roughly 75 to 80 percent of the political prisoner category and about 25 percent of the total camp population. Medical experimentation at Ravensbrück was almost entirely conducted on Polish women. Records indicate that of the 86 women known to have suffered experimentation, 74 of them were Polish women.<sup>49</sup> Morrison asserts that the Polish women were the most heterogenous of the national groups at Ravensbrück with the prisoner population reflecting a fairly accurate cross-section of their own society at least until a transport of roughly 80 Polish teachers and professors arrived in 1940.<sup>50</sup> These women began organizing educational programs for the other Polish prisoners. The majority of Polish prisoners shared a deep sense of nationalism as well as a distaste for communism.<sup>51</sup>

French political prisoners also organized highly effective resistance movements prompting the SS officers to target the French in order to minimize their influence.<sup>52</sup> The French

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<sup>47</sup> Bessmann and Eschebach, *The Ravensbrück Women's Concentration Camp*, 79.

<sup>48</sup> Nanda Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss: Inmate #6582 in Ravensbrück Concentration Camp for Women* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 14.

<sup>49</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 245.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

resistance within Ravensbrück developed within the chaos of a massive population swell between 1943-1944.<sup>53</sup> French prisoners hosted Bastille Day celebrations and enthusiastically sang “La Marseillaise” despite the threat of punishment.<sup>54</sup> Germaine Tillion, a French anthropologist and member of the French Resistance, was sent to Ravensbrück in the fall of 1943. Tillion continued resistance work even while imprisoned in Ravensbrück. *Nacht und Nebel* (Night and Fog) prisoners, or those who were arrested under the Night and Fog directive targeting political activists, were not permitted to perform labor outside of the main camp.<sup>55</sup> Those prisoners who did not have fixed work assignments were known as *Verfügbaren*, or “available”, and were typically drafted to perform the physical labor of camp maintenance. The *Verfügbaren* “were at the bottom of the stratified camp social order, the *sous-prolétariat* of the camp.”<sup>56</sup> Tillion described the lives of the *Verfügbaren* in her memoir, “I can assure you that the difference that existed between the living conditions of a ‘blockova’ [prisoner in charge of a housing block] or a *Lagerpolizei* [camp police agent], Polish, and those of a miserable French or Russian *Verfügbar* was greater than that which can be between the Queen of England and the most pathetic frequent inhabitant of flophouses.”<sup>57</sup>

While imprisoned, Germaine Tillion authored an operetta entitled *Le Verfügbar aux Enfers* (The *Verfügbaren* in the Underworld), a parody of Jacques Offenbach’s *L’Orphée aux Enfers* (*Orpheus in the Underworld*). The operetta was staged secretly at the back of a block and included a chorus of *Verfügs* singing of “a model camp with all comforts, water, gas, electricity – above all gas.”<sup>58</sup> Reid argues that this operetta was both cultural art and a call to resistance

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<sup>53</sup> Donald Reid, “Available in Hell: Germaine Tillion’s Operetta of Resistance at Ravensbrück,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 25, no. 2 (2007): 143.

<sup>54</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 98.

<sup>55</sup> Reid, “Available in Hell,” 142.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>58</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 514.

within the camp. Fellow French prisoner Geneviève de Gaulle-Anthonioz describes meeting Germaine Tillion; “I first met Germaine Tillion at the Ravensbrück camp in the beginning of February 1944...Methodically and with precision, Germaine Tillion had quantified the cost price of each inmate but also what she could bring back according to the strengths and her capabilities. By making us discover this, she wanted to enable us, her mother most of all, to overcome this absurdity in which we lived.”<sup>59</sup>

The majority of Dutch political prisoners were transported to Ravensbrück from the Vught concentration camp, also known as Herzogenbusch, located in Holland.<sup>60</sup> Vught became known as “one of the few concentration camps located outside the Reich territory.”<sup>61</sup> A large group of women transported to Ravensbrück had been, at one time, part of the Red Army. These political prisoners first arrived at Ravensbrück on February 27, 1943. Many of these women were highly educated and included a large number of doctors. In September 1944 another large transport of Dutch women arrived at Ravensbrück. A large percentage of these women were selected to work in the Siemens plant.<sup>62</sup> Corrie ten Boom and her sister Betsie both arrived in this transport and were chosen to perform labor for Siemens. Ten Boom describes this experience in her memoir, “The work at Siemens, however, was sheer misery. Betsie and I had to push a heavy handcart to a railroad siding where we unloaded large metal plates from a boxcar and wheeled them to a receiving gate at the factory. The grueling workday lasted eleven hours.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Geneviève de Gaulle Anthonioz, “À Ravensbrück” *Esprit*. No. 261 (2) (Février 2000): 86-87.

<sup>60</sup> Megargee, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 814.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 815.

<sup>62</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 423.

<sup>63</sup> ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, 183.

Captured British spies working with the Special Operations Executive (SOE) were held at Ravensbrück. Violette Szabo, Denise Bloch, and Lilian Rolfe had all parachuted into France for separate missions and were eventually captured and transported to Ravensbrück.<sup>64</sup> These women continued to resist even while imprisoned and launched a protest at the work camp Torgau by refusing to generate munitions. As a result the spies were transported to a subcamp used for punishment known as Königsberg.<sup>65</sup> Szabo, Bloch, and Rolfe were transferred back to the main camp in January of 1945 and executed. Odette Hallows was also a member of the SOE held at Ravensbrück after being arrested in France. While being interrogated and tortured by the Gestapo following her arrest, Hallows claimed that she was a relative of Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Upon her arrival in Ravensbrück, Odette was held as a special hostage in solitary confinement for nine months, surviving to be liberated.<sup>66</sup>

### **Jehovah's Witnesses**

Religious dissidents were forced to wear purple triangles and mainly consisted of Jehovah's Witnesses. Nazi persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses began as early as 1933, with the Nazis placing these religious dissenters in preventive detention starting in 1936. Those in preventive detention were designated for concentration camps once the war broke out, and Jehovah's Witnesses were part of the first transport of women who arrived at Ravensbrück in 1939. Due to their religious convictions, these women refused to participate in any forced labor that aided the war effort. Upon their arrival at Ravensbrück, Jehovah's Witnesses were sometimes tortured for their refusal to cooperate and obey orders. Max Koegel, the officer in charge of Ravensbrück, ordered the men of Sachsenhausen to construct an entirely new prison on

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<sup>64</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 401.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 522.

<sup>66</sup> Bessmann and Eschebach, *The Ravensbrück Women's Concentration Camp*, 107.

the grounds of Ravensbrück with the sole purpose of housing the Jehovah's Witnesses. Margarete Buber-Neumann recalls the early consequences of the Jehovah's Witnesses refusal to work, "...many of these poor old women were dragged along the ground. They all refused to stand...The S.S. Camp Leader Redwitz seemed to delight in bullying and mocking these wretched women. He ordered them to stand up, and when they paid no attention, he began to bellow...he ordered the "camp police" to fetch buckets of water and pour them over the squatting women."<sup>67</sup>

Himmler came to inspect Ravensbrück in January 1940. By this time, the religious women had been locked inside the newly constructed bunker for three weeks. At the end of visit Himmler ordered Koegel to release the Jehovah's Witnesses from their collective prison. As Helm explains, "he [Himmler] seems to have grasped what Koegel could not. No amount of beating would make Witnesses renounce their faith. Moreover, apart from their refusal to do war work or recognize the Führer, they were model prisoners; it was against their faith to lie or escape and they made excellent domestic servants."<sup>68</sup> He said, "even punishment has no effect on them" and recommended that they should be "put to work – on farms, for instance, where they have nothing to do with the war and all its madness."<sup>69</sup> Shortly after the visit, Himmler ordered the Witnesses to work as cleaners in the homes of SS officers. From then on, the Jehovah's Witnesses of Ravensbrück were given more leeway than other prisoners due to their religious conviction and relative trustworthiness. Katharina Thoenes was arrested three times for her religious activities before being sent to Ravensbrück in 1943. While imprisoned at

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<sup>67</sup> Margarete Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators: Prisoner of Stalin and Hitler* (London: Random House UK, 2008), 248.

<sup>68</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 69.

<sup>69</sup> RFSS, letter to Müller and Pohl, cited in Detlef Garbe, *Between Resistance and Martyrdom: Jehovah's Witnesses in the Third Reich* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 522.

Ravensbrück, Katharina performed forced labor in the Siemens plant. However, in June of 1944 Katharina was transported to Bavaria to work in the home of an SS officer.<sup>70</sup>

### **Criminals, Asocials, and Romani**

Asocials housed at Ravensbrück were designated by a back triangle on their prison uniforms. Saidel explains that “the category of ‘asocial’ was extremely broad. It included prostitutes, lesbians, and Romani (Sinti and Roma), as well as women who were considered sexually promiscuous or had elected to have abortions”<sup>71</sup> Unlike male homosexuality, there were no laws under Nazi rule explicitly making female homosexuality illegal. However, lesbians could be, and were, arrested and categorized as asocial. While there was a separate block for prisoners designated as prostitutes, there was no block devoted exclusively to hold lesbians. Prisoners caught performing sexual acts with one another were often moved to the *Strafblock*, or punishment block.<sup>72</sup>

The presence of lesbians at Ravensbrück caused various social issues within the camp. For many of the other prisoners, this was their first and only contact with lesbians in their lifetime. Not only were these women unfamiliar with lesbianism, but many were also ignorant of all matters of sexuality. As Rose Szywicz Warner explains, “we didn’t know what lesbians is. And I said ‘What are they doing there?’ So they said ‘Don’t you know? They make love.’ And I said, ‘What? Love? I don’t know love woman with a woman.’[sic] And they said, ‘They [are] lesbians.’”<sup>73</sup> There were, of course, instances of hostility toward the lesbian prisoners stemming

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<sup>70</sup> Bessmann and Eschebach, *The Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp*, 86.

<sup>71</sup> Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, 37.

<sup>72</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 94.

<sup>73</sup> Rose Szywicz Warner, interview by Randy M. Goldman, September 12, 1994.  
<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504754>.

from this ignorance and homophobia, although most prisoners attempted simply to avoid any contact with them.

Other survivors of Ravensbrück had negative feelings and memories toward their lesbian co-prisoners. Nanda Herbermann described lesbians within the camp in prejudicial terms as, “completely morally ruined...They performed the most depraved acts with each other, since sexuality was the only thing left for them.”<sup>74</sup> Contrary to some of the more negative stereotypes and records of lesbians within the camp, the majority were not sexually aggressive or merely participating in sexual contact with woman due to a lack of options as Nanda implied. Maria (Mizzi) Berner was a union steward from Vienna arrested for ‘communist machinations’. After serving three and a half years in prison, Berner was transported to Ravensbrück in 1943. While in the camp, she met her future partner, Anna Hand. The nature of their relationship within Ravensbrück is not recorded, but following liberation the couple remained together and adopted a daughter, Ilse.<sup>75</sup>

Sinti and Roma women, or Romani, had been subjected to persecution prior to 1933, and enslaved in parts of Europe into the nineteenth century. Stereotypes of the Romani as thieves and liars prevailed in European society creating an assumed connection between the Romani people and criminality. In 1936, the Reich Interior Ministry published guidelines for documenting the Romani including taking photographs and fingerprints for identification purposes. Similar to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Sinti and Roma women were placed in preventive detention and set aside for the concentration camps. The first 440 Romani women were brought from Austria and Germany on June 29, 1939. Those propagating the notion of genetic criminality and attempting to determine a solution to such a problem simultaneously aimed to resolve the Romani issue.

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<sup>74</sup> Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss*, 136.

<sup>75</sup> Bessmann and Eschebach, *The Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp*, 91.

Similar to the Polish political prisoners at the camp, the Sinti and Roma were subjected to medical experimentation. Unlike Polish prisoners, however, Romani women were selected for mass sterilization experiments conducted by a Dr. Carl Clauberg. Saidel explains that most sterilization procedures were forced upon women without any prior information, but “some women were pressed to agree to the experiments with false promises of freedom in exchange for their own or their children’s sterilizations.”<sup>76</sup> Ceija Stojka was sent to Ravensbrück at the age of 11 and recalled narrowly escaping Clauberg’s sterilization campaign.<sup>77</sup> She and her sisters were taken to the infirmary for the sterilization procedure but were spared due to a temporary electrical failure.<sup>78</sup>

Some women imprisoned at Ravensbrück were held as “general criminals” or “habitual criminals”. These were women who had committed typically non-violent, petty crimes such as stealing. As Bessmann explains, “Women imprisoned as ‘career criminals’ and ‘preventive detainees’ often had multiple previous convictions for minor offences, such as petty theft, fraud or illegal abortions. Many of these women were poor, and very little is known about their situation in Ravensbrück.”<sup>79</sup> Other socially unacceptable or “criminal acts” included electing to have an abortion or working as a prostitute or brothel owner. Annette Timm explains that the criminalization of female sexuality included, “vague categories as becoming too easily sexually aroused (‘sexuelle Erregbarkeit’) or creating a ‘strongly erotic impression’. ‘Oversexed’ women, along with those who infected soldiers with venereal disease, were immediately placed in one or more of these categories: promiscuous individual, prostitute, or sterilization candidate.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, 40.

<sup>77</sup> Bessmann and Eschebach, *The Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp*, 95.

<sup>78</sup> Ceija Stojka, *Wir Leben im Verborgenen: Erinnerungen einer Rom-Zigeunerin* (1988), 15-40.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>80</sup> Annette F. Timm, “Sex with a Purpose: Prostitution, Venereal Disease and Militarized Masculinity in the Third Reich,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. ½ (January-April 2002): 234.

Not only were these categorizations vague and extensive, they were also enforced unevenly. In 1941, a Polish woman named Susanna Wrona attempted to perform an abortion which resulted in the death of Gertrud Redmer, a German woman. As Doris Bergen explains, “Wrona, it turned out, had performed many abortions for Polish women. It was only when she dared to end the pregnancy of a certified ethnic German that she faced trouble.”<sup>81</sup> The judge at Wrona’s trial sentenced her to eight years in prison stating that, “Precisely here, in the incorporated eastern territories, anything that damages the power of the German *Volk* against the Polish population with its high birthrate is particularly dangerous and despicable. I therefore consider performing abortions on German women in this area to deserve an especially heavy punishment.”<sup>82</sup>

### Prostitutes

Prostitutes imprisoned in Ravensbrück were somewhat isolated from the rest of the camp prisoners. Held in Block II, known as the “Whores’ Block” or *Dirnenblock*, the prostitutes retained their own subculture within Ravensbrück. As Morrison points out, “this is a sensitive and difficult issue, particularly as the sources for this information (other prisoners) are overwhelming unsympathetic to Asocials in general and prostitutes in particular.”<sup>83</sup> Prostitutes began to arrive at Moringen in large numbers in 1938.<sup>84</sup> Elisabeth (Else) Krug was a prostitute from Düsseldorf. She was known for the more particular services she offered dealing with fetish work and sado-masochism. Krug was well liked among her fellow prisoners for stealing food for the women she supervised and refusing direct orders to beat others as punishment. Krug was

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<sup>81</sup> Wachsmann, “From Indefinite Confinement to Extermination.” in *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*, ed. Robert Gellately and Nathan Stoltzfus, 287.

<sup>82</sup> Oberstaatsanwalt Herder als Leiter der Anklagebehörde beim Sondergericht to Reichsminister der Justiz, “Handakten zu der Strafsache gegen Wrona,” Bromber, 28 July 1941, AP Bydgoszcz 80 / 506.

<sup>83</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 45.

<sup>84</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 15.

selected to be murdered during the '14f13' campaign and died in the gas chamber at the Bernburg sanatorium in February 1942.<sup>85</sup> The story of Marie P. demonstrates the impact of the changes made to criminal law under Nazi rule. Marie managed to stay alive in Hamburg through prostitution, theft, and fraud. She was forcibly sterilized in the mid-1930s following an accusation of "moral inferiority". Marie was classified as a habitual criminal due to her multiple prior offenses and convictions. In 1941, she was sentenced to time in prison which was later extended to "preventive detention". Transferred to Ravensbrück in 1943, Marie survived until liberation, but was involuntarily institutionalized in Farmsen in Hamburg and was not released from preventive detention until 1950.<sup>86</sup>

Unfortunately, there is a lack of information about the specific lives of asocials. As Helm explains, "...they left no memoirs. Speaking out after the war would mean revealing the reason for imprisonment in the first place, and incurring more shame... The German associations set up after the war to help camp survivors were dominated by political prisoners... not a single black- or green-triangle survivor was called upon to give evidence for the Hamburg War Crimes trials, or at any later trials."<sup>87</sup> Many of these women simply disappeared after liberation. With the destruction of cities and, by extension, their red-light districts, there was no place for these women to return. Asocial survivors varied dramatically from one another. As a result, these women did not form associations or survivors' groups.<sup>88</sup> Else Krug's history is quite rare in that her story was preserved in the memoirs of political prisoner Margarete Buber-Neumann who had developed an unlikely friendship with Krug.

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<sup>85</sup> Bessmann and Eschebach, *The Ravensbrück Women's Concentration Camp*, 87.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>87</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 90.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

Prostitutes were among the first selected for forced prostitution in camp brothels. Those chosen for this “work” were promised that they would be released after six months in the brothel. Nanda Herbermann, block elder of Block II, detested the hypocrisy of the camp brothels and the forced prostitution of the women she was charged to oversee. She stated, “It is a horrible fact that people who had been imprisoned for their depravity, and for “endangering human society,” were now commanded by the state which held them for this precise reason, to be depraved again.”<sup>89</sup> A young girl named Frieda who Herbermann felt a certain affinity for, volunteered to work in the brothel located at Mauthausen. Herbermann expressed her complicated feelings in her memoir addressing Frieda directly, “Through tragic circumstances you had landed in a bordello all too early, and begged me to help you so that you would be ready for a later life... You in particular could have begun a different life someday in freedom, you had a good foundation for that. But you disappointed me and volunteered yourself for the bordello in the Mauthausen Concentration Camp for Men... You never came back from Mauthausen.”<sup>90</sup>

### **Jewish Women**

While Ravensbrück was largely ignored in early scholarship, the Jewish women imprisoned within the camp received even less attention. While Jewish women were held at Ravensbrück, these women were consistently a minority of the prisoner population and many of these women fit into an additional category such as political prisoner or asocial. The camp acted as a waystation for many Jewish women who were subsequently transported to another concentration camp such as Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen.<sup>91</sup>

### ***Sonder-Häftling*: “Special” Prisoners**

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<sup>89</sup> Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss*, 132.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>91</sup> Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, xvi.

“Special” prisoner was an additional distinction for women assigned to a different official category. There was no corresponding color or symbol identifying these women by their uniform. However, most “special” prisoners were officially recorded as political prisoners. These women had close connections, typically familial ties, to powerful politicians and were often targeted for arrest with the intent to use them as a bargaining chip. The practice of arresting someone with prominent regime opposing relatives was referred to as *Sippenhaft*, or “kin imprisonment”.<sup>92</sup> Segregated from the general prisoner population for their own protection, these women also received special treatment. “Special” prisoners lived in their own block within the camp and were assigned an individual cell. While these prisoners were not crowded in a bunk or forced to perform intense outdoor manual labor, they were kept inside with only occasional outdoor walks and lived in solitary confinement. While their conditions were better than those of the majority of inmates, “special” prisoners were not able to escape vermin, serious illness, or suffering.

Due to their unique status, and the political interest the SS had in preserving their lives, these prisoners were more likely to survive Ravensbrück and to have been released from the camp prior to the camp’s official liberation by the Soviets. As such, a significant portion of published survivor memoirs are of those distinguished as “special”. Geneviève de Gaulle, niece of General Charles de Gaulle, was one such “special” prisoner. She describes her living situation, “I am in a building inside the Ravensbrück concentration camp called the bunker. It’s a prison within the prison, which also serves as a solitary confinement cell. Here there is no blanket, no straw mattress; bread is handed out every three days, soup once every five days.”<sup>93</sup> While held in solitary Geneviève contracted scurvy, corneal ulcerations, and pleurisy, and passed

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<sup>92</sup> Bessmann and Eschebach, *The Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp*, 50.

<sup>93</sup> de Gaulle, *The Dawn of Hope*, 2.

the time by naming and organizing races for the cockroaches who shared her cell.<sup>94</sup> The commandant of the camp and two SS men visited Geneviève. They asked her a series of questions regarding her arrest and subsequent imprisonment in Ravensbrück and then sent her to the SS infirmary for a medical examination. The next day she was handed the clothes she had arrived in and told to dress. She was escorted out of the camp by SS officers and released.

Gemma LaGuardia Gluck, sister of New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, was also housed as a “special” prisoner. Gemma was indeed a unique prisoner, as she was also a citizen of the United States while imprisoned at Ravensbrück. Gemma was not only Fiorello’s sister, she was married to a Hungarian Jew named Herman Gluck and was Jewish herself. Arrested while living in Budapest, Gemma was temporarily imprisoned in Mauthausen. Upon hearing of her arrest, Heinrich Himmler sent specific orders for her to be held as a hostage in Ravensbrück.<sup>95</sup> While in Ravensbrück Gemma was spared outdoor labor and held a coveted work position in the mail room sorting packages.<sup>96</sup> As the Allies approached Ravensbrück, a camp wide selection was held. During this selection Gemma was set aside for the gas chamber. She recalls this selection, “I knew I was condemned to die...The overseer of our block went at once to speak with Suhren, the commander of the camp, reminding him who I was. Because I was the sister of La Guardia, I was saved, but the others of my poor comrades were killed. The camp personnel director told me afterward that I was kept from the gas chamber because they were fearful that some harm would come to the Germans in New York in reprisal.”<sup>97</sup> The next day, April 15, 1945, Commandant Fritz Suhren escorted Gemma, as well as her daughter and grandson, out of

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 12, 13, 47, 27.

<sup>95</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 392.

<sup>96</sup> Gluck, *Fiorello’s Sister: Incorporating My Story*, 40.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 80.

Ravensbrück to freedom.<sup>98</sup> She was released from Ravensbrück and transported to Berlin as potential participants in a prisoner exchange.<sup>99</sup>

### **Prisoners as Staff**

Insidiously, the standard hierarchy of concentration camps relied on prisoners to work closely with the SS and overseers to enforce rules and maintain order. The SS assigned roles such as block mothers and *kapos* to specific prisoners. These chosen women were typically Germans who would be less likely to encourage rule breaking or rebellion. Due to the supervisory nature of these roles, inmates assigned a position of power above their fellow prisoners faced ethical and moral decisions complicated by their individual desire to avoid death. In addition to encouraging existing prejudices against race, religion, and political affiliation, the Nazi hierarchy further neutralized potential solidarity amongst the prisoners. Nanda Herbermann was appointed to the position of block elder for the block devoted to housing prostitutes. She describes this promotion to “brothel mother” saying, “so I had the ‘great honor,’ after a few months’ work as barracks elder, of being promoted by the administration of the camp to mother of the prostitutes. I don’t know what I would have given to have avoided this post.”<sup>100</sup> While Herbermann eventually developed compassion for the prisoners in her ward, other prisoners appointed to leadership positions swiftly began to abuse their power. During the first Hamburg Ravensbrück trial three of the female defendants were prisoners accused of mistreating their fellow inmates.<sup>101</sup> Carmen Mory, formerly a Swiss journalist, had begun working for the SS and

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>99</sup> Irith Dublon-Knebel, ed. *A Holocaust Crossroads: Jewish Women and Children in Ravensbrück* (Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010), 227.

<sup>100</sup> Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss*, 134.

<sup>101</sup> Bazylar, *Forgotten Trials of the Holocaust*, 141.

passing information to the Czech resistance. Eventually arrested by the Gestapo, Mory was held in Ravensbrück and assigned the position of *kapo*. According to one witness, “The Belgian women in the camp called Mory ‘The Monster.’ She used to drag sick women, half-dead, out of their beds...have them pulled into the washhouse, dumped on the cold stones, and have buckets of cold water poured over them...”<sup>102</sup>

### Conclusion

The diverse and complicated demographics of the inmates held in Ravensbrück led to complex social dynamics, relationships, and conflict. Jack G. Morrison provides an extensive examination of different prisoner categories and divisions within the camp. Through his analysis Morrison concludes that Ravensbrück cannot be considered “a community” because it was “too diverse and heterogenous.”<sup>103</sup> He instead proposes that a series of subcultures developed within the camp and that these subcultures were largely based on language and nationality. The blocks within the camp were divided along such lines by the camp administration fostering the existence of these subcultures. These divisions not only created solidarity within each group, but also emphasized existing prejudices and hatreds. For example, most prisoners had a general distrust of the Romani prisoners due to longstanding stereotypes. Other prisoners deeply disliked the Communist prisoners due to their personal experience with the Communist takeover of Poland. Countess Karaolina Lankorońska’s distaste for communist prisoners did not change during her time at camp. She described the Communist prisoners as, “held in high esteem by all nationalities in the camp, with the exception of the Poles. The bestowal of homage on often somewhat uncivilised girls...was for me the first indication of just how far the camp had become ‘Communist’ by the autumn of 1943...One was only aware of the infinitely alien uncouthness

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>103</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 308.

of these girls...”<sup>104</sup> Women imprisoned for habitual criminal activity and prostitution were also ostracized by the other prisoners. These prejudices and divisions are evident even within survivor memoir and testimony. Nanda Herbermann describes the prostitutes of Block II as “women of quite inferior nature.”<sup>105</sup> The complicated lives of the prisoners of Ravensbrück clearly demonstrates the complicated nature of the camp itself. As Morrison concludes, “in the concentration camp one’s own national identity was confirmed and strengthened in relation to almost all others, which is to say that national animosities abounded.”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Countess Karolina Lanckorońska, *Michelangelo in Ravensbrück: One Woman’s War Against the Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2005), 235-236.

<sup>105</sup> Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss*, 128.

<sup>106</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 87.

### Chapter Three

Historically, the subject of sexual violence perpetrated against women during the Holocaust has been both controversial and difficult to examine.<sup>1</sup> Sexual violence during times of war has been portrayed as an unfortunate, but expected, byproduct of warfare. Enemy women “became more desirable prey but also more invisible as human beings, and their ultimate insignificance engendered complete indifference to their suffering.”<sup>2</sup> This narrow and reductive view of sexual violence removes the necessity for study and ignores the effects of sexual assault on the dehumanization of individuals, as well as, any remaining psychological effects on the victims of these crimes. Myrna Goldenberg writes, “It behooves us to acknowledge, at the outset, that the Holocaust was not about gender or sex. However...women were vulnerable in different ways than men were, gender and sex cannot be dismissed by responsible scholars.”<sup>3</sup> Regina Mülhäuser argues that “the aim of emphasizing the uniqueness of Nazi racist and anti-semitic violence seems, somewhat tragically, to have contributed to obfuscating knowledge about sexual crimes.”<sup>4</sup> Interpreters such as Helen Fagin and Cynthia Ozick argue that a focus on female experience “may denigrate the Holocaust’s significance” by reducing its events to an example of sexism and detract from the fact that Nazi viewed their Jewish victims outside of gender or age distinctions, only as Jews.”<sup>5</sup> This argument has been largely dismissed by scholars of the Holocaust in recent years. Carol Rittner and John K. Roth contend that the Nazis did distinguish between male and female, even within their racial discrimination and that an emphasis on the

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<sup>1</sup> Rittner and Roth, eds. *Women and the Holocaust*, xi.

<sup>2</sup> Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Myrna Goldenberg and Amy H. Shapiro, eds., *Different Horrors, Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2013), 100.

<sup>4</sup> Hilary Earl and Karl A. Schleunes, eds. *Lessons and Legacies XI: Expanding Perspectives on the Holocaust in the Changing World* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 32.

<sup>5</sup> Rittner and Roth, *Women and the Holocaust*, 4.

experiences of women presents a more complete examination of the Holocaust's significance, rather than detract from the suffering of other victims.<sup>6</sup>

Researching the existing accounts detailing sexual violation is a necessary step to not only offer an accurate account of the Holocaust but also acknowledge women's unique suffering. As Rochelle Saidel argues, "Every survivor's story is distinct, but women's experiences were in some ways different from those of men in the context of the universal suffering of all victims of the Holocaust."<sup>7</sup> Distinguishing between different types and methods of sexual violence provides a nuanced view of sexual assault as a method of degradation and dehumanization, rather than a natural result of warfare.

Patricia Szobar presents two categorizations of sexual violence, "The first comprises the forms of sexual violence that accompanied and arguably were integral to the National Socialist regime's exterminatory program...The second...includes the sexual violence that accompanied the National Socialist project of racial hygiene..."<sup>8</sup> Nomi Levenkron attempts to categorize various methods of assaults, specifically against Jewish women during the Holocaust. Levenkron also presents an argument for utilizing the term "sexual molestation." She writes,

I have chosen the term 'sexual molestation' because the range of terms used to describe the abuse of women during the course of war is wide and includes a long list of acts, chief of which are rape and sexual slavery, but which also include sexual harassment, sex for food, and other practices...I suggest an artificial division into four categories concerning sexual assault: rape, sexual slavery, bartering sex in exchange for some commodity, and sexual humiliation.<sup>9</sup>

Upon review of primary source narratives of the women imprisoned in Ravensbrück, it is clear that a few additional categories are merited. Sexual violence perpetrated against women during

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<sup>6</sup> Rittner and Roth, *Women and the Holocaust*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Dagmar Herzog, ed. *Lessons and Legacies VII: The Holocaust in International Perspective* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 159.

<sup>9</sup> Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, 15-17.

the Holocaust must be acknowledged beyond these categories of rape, forced prostitution, bartering, and sexual humiliation to include sexual molestation, medical experimentation and reproductive mutilation, and abortion and infanticide.

### **Sexual Humiliation**

The category of sexual humiliation takes into account the social expectation of modesty. Most women grew up in communities which taught modesty in social relations between women and men.<sup>10</sup> Upon arrival at Ravensbrück, the guards instructed the women to undress in order to be sanitized and inspected for lice. Natalie B. Hess recounts her experience waiting in line for her examination at Ravensbrück and watching women undress, “Inside of me fear grows. I can’t stop trembling. Somehow even though I am just eight years old, I know that what I see is a process of degradation, an obliteration of spirit.”<sup>11</sup> For many women, this was the first time that they undressed in front of a non-family member.<sup>12</sup> For others, this was the first time seeing another adult woman naked and sometimes even their own mothers naked. This forced disrobement was an emotional and humiliating experience for these women.

Compounding this sense of humiliation, male SS officers were often present for the initial shower and lice check. Nanda Herbermann remembered, “Robbed of our clothes, which were thrown into a corner, we stood there stark naked. SS men paced back and forth between us. For hours we stood there in our nakedness. For me it was the most difficult thing.”<sup>13</sup> Men seeing their naked bodies was incredibly distressing for these women not only due to a cultural or religious sense of modesty, but also because they themselves had not made the decision to be

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<sup>10</sup> Herzog, *Lessons and Legacies VII*, 210.

<sup>11</sup> Natalie B. Hess, *Remembering Ravensbrück: Holocaust to Healing* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Publishing Group, 2020), 31.

<sup>12</sup> Herzog, *Lessons and Legacies VII*, 210.

<sup>13</sup> Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss*, 110.

naked. Despite the supposed function of the examination, this was not a clinical environment with medical professionals. Instead, the SS officers present oftentimes mocked the women's bodies.<sup>14</sup> Theresia Pfeifer remembered, "We had to line up in pairs and we were led to the bath. First we had to strip naked in front of the SS. Everyone was weeping and crying out. People said you have to be silent or you'll be shot."<sup>15</sup> The humiliation of being forced to strip naked while being watched and mocked cannot be equivocated with rape, but it must be considered an element of sexual assault. Saidel explains that "...gender-associated qualities caused some of the women to suffer. For example, because of the social relations between women and men at that time, girls were brought up to be modest, and many women were traumatized when forced to parade naked before men, and even other women."<sup>16</sup>

The daily roll call also occasionally devolved into sexual humiliation. Certain SS guards or the camp commandant could order that the prisoners, or certain prisoners, remove their clothing for the duration of the *appellplatz*. Vera Laska explains that "Stripping the women naked was also practiced at times of camp selections, or on long and boring Sunday afternoons, when the SS had nothing better to do than order a roll call and expose the powerless women to a cruel parade."<sup>17</sup> Herbermann recalls that "When the roll wasn't correct, the commandant often showed up and everyone began to tremble. Whenever he happened to feel like it, this or that inmate had to strip naked before him and before all of us on Camp Street. He was the most horrible human monster that I have ever experienced."<sup>18</sup> SS men would also visit the women's shower in order to "jeer, tease, and taunt" the women.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>16</sup> Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Herzog, *Lessons and Legacies VII*, 266.

<sup>18</sup> Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss*, 118.

<sup>19</sup> Herzog, *Lessons and Legacies VII*, 266.

Using the restrooms became another form of sexual humiliation. The facilities at Ravensbrück did not provide any privacy. Women were forced to partially undress and use the restroom in front of other women as well as guards. Saidel concludes “the overcrowding and resulting close contact between the women in the barrack, and especially in the latrines, made it impossible for women to retain their inbred sense of modesty, and this caused severe mental, as well as physical, torment.”<sup>20</sup> Using the toilets was also humiliating for those prisoners who had not previously interacted with lesbians. Erika Buchmann explained that lovemaking was “sometimes shameless and unrestrained” and warned that “If you got up at night to use the toilet, you had to wait because the little couples were in the small compartments...”<sup>21</sup> Plumbing issues contributed to the humiliation of using the restrooms. Each of the original barracks had eight toilets, which was not sufficient especially during times of overcrowding. The plumbing broke down fairly frequently creating an unhygienic mess and forcing women to relieve themselves outside in the open air.<sup>22</sup>

Prisoners were also subject to fairly frequent inspections and examinations as part of the selection process. The SS forced the women to stand outside of their barracks and undress. A group of SS would inspect their discarded clothes for contraband while a second group of SS carried out a search of the barracks. The women stood naked for the entirety of the inspection.<sup>23</sup> Medical examinations occurred fairly frequently as well. As Morrison notes, “to make matters worse, the women were often kept waiting for hours, naked, for the doctor(s) to arrive.”<sup>24</sup> Corrie ten Boom recalled, “Fridays – the recurrent humiliation of medical inspection...we were

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<sup>20</sup> Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, 207.

<sup>21</sup> Erika Buchmann, “Brief an eine berliner Reportein,” 38-39.

<sup>22</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 175.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-122.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

forbidden even to wrap ourselves in our own arms, but had to maintain our erect, hands-at-sides position as we filed slowly past a phalanx of grinning guards. How there could have been any pleasure in the sight of these stick-thin legs and hunger-bloated stomachs I could not imagine. Surely there is no more wretched sight than the human body unloved and uncared for.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Molestation**

Molestation existed within the concentration camps largely as an extension of sexual humiliation and part of entrance into the camp. When women were forced to undress for their initial shower upon entry, they were also examined for lice. Women had both their heads and pubic areas shaved to combat lice infestations. At some point during the admittance process, Nazi guards conducted body cavity searches presented as vaginal examinations. Selma van de Perre, imprisoned in Ravensbrück under the name Margareta van der Kuit, recalled this examination: “it was humiliating and degrading, and I often thought it must have been particularly terrible for nuns and other religious individuals. The doctor didn’t wash his hands and I don’t think he wore any gloves. If he did, he didn’t change them between examinations.”<sup>26</sup> There are accounts of this ‘clinical’ search escalating into molestation, digital penetration, or rape without the use of genitalia. SS officers conducting these examinations would continue “searching.” This became entwined with humiliation as male officers either conducted the search, or at the very least observed, oftentimes continuing to mock the women and in some cases pretending to remove jewels from them mocking Jewish stereotypes. Ludmilla Voloshima said, “the SS laughed when they found jewellery hidden in a woman’s vagina, but everyone knew they’d made it look like that.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, 178.

<sup>26</sup> Selma van de Perre, *My Name is Selma* (London: Bantam Press, 2020), 141-142.

<sup>27</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 271.

A woman named Roma T. recounted her experience with processing in another camp. She said, “In addition we were told that we should conceal nothing, because we would be examined gynecologically...Some women, out of excitement, standing for the first time stark naked in front of men became hysterical. They cried terribly. But among us were those who said, ‘If they are not ashamed, why should we be ashamed?’”<sup>28</sup> Sarah Helm relates Valentina Samoilova’s experience with a similar gynecological examination. She says, “each woman was examined all over, hands thrust inside them, searching, as the SS looked on and shouted: ‘Filthy bitches, Russian whores.’”<sup>29</sup>

### **Bartering / Sexual Extortion**

Bartering sexual favors to men and women in order to receive commodities is a form of sexual violence against women that cannot be equivocated to rape, necessitating a separate, intricate and nuanced category because “sex in exchange for food is neither rape nor prostitution, but it is not exactly consensual sex.”<sup>30</sup> Women retain some of their agency in this situation because they have somewhat of a choice. However, this is an example of limited agency and must still be viewed as a form of sexual violence and human degradation. Offering sexual favors, whether to guards or fellow prisoners, was essentially making a choice to survive. Goldenberg describes bartering saying, “the woman, though a victim, may experience shame but, at the same time, has the choice of using her body to save herself and thereby become an agent of her own survival.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Donald Niewyk, ed., *Fresh Wounds: Early Narratives of Holocaust Survival* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 217.

<sup>29</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 271.

<sup>30</sup> Goldenberg and Shapiro, *Different Horrors, Same Hell*, 115.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

Bartering within the gates of Ravensbrück is especially interesting because of the lesbian population imprisoned at the camp. Female prisoners with access to additional food rations, clothing, or tools would offer these items to other women in exchange for sexual favors. These lesbians would reach out to other women who were openly gay within the camp, as well as to women who were not gay, but were desperate to survive. As Helm explains, “The prisoner lesbianism took many forms. Some of the women who came here were already openly gay...a handful were listed on the records as *lesbisch* and wore black triangles. Many confirmed lesbians made no attempt to hide their sexuality...and sometimes preying on others who were not gay but were easily drawn in. Other women offered sex in return for food.”<sup>32</sup>

Unfortunately, the act of bartering and its connection to homosexuality within Ravensbrück, served to propagate negative stereotypes of lesbians in general and dismissed the consensual romantic relationships which did develop between women in the camp as purely exploitative. Scholars have even equated lesbian relationships with prostitution.<sup>33</sup> While it is important to recognize that sexual acts between female prisoners exchanged for favors is an act of extortion and is not entirely consensual, it must be acknowledged that this was not the nature of all camp relationships and cannot be used to reinforce stereotypes or denigrate lesbian prisoners. This controversy is not only evident in scholarship examining Ravensbrück, but is also demonstrated with the history of the Ravensbrück memorial. Debate persists among survivor groups about developing a memorial for the lesbian prisoners of Ravensbrück as many other prisoners did not agree with homosexuality or had a negative perception of or experience with lesbians.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 93.

<sup>33</sup> Rittner and Roth, *Women and the Holocaust*, 265.

<sup>34</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 94.

Designating a separate category for bartering is integral to a comprehensive study of the Holocaust and the sexual violence which occurred as a result. The relative silence acknowledging the complicated nature of sexual assault could stem from the fact that the issue of bartering does not follow the narrative of Nazis as the purely evil perpetrators. Pascale Bos explains, “Most of the men responsible for sexual barter with, coercion of, and sexual violence against Jewish women were inmates (both Jewish and non-Jewish) who were themselves incarcerated as slave laborers yet also held positions of relative power in ghettos, factories, and camps.”<sup>35</sup> Contrary to the idea that an acknowledgement of the realities of bartering serves to soften Nazi culpability and instead place blame on other prisoners, providing an accurate representation of life under Nazi rule demonstrates the true evil of their power, that they were able to turn their victims into perpetrators of sexual violence as well. In at least one instance, a block elder used her position of relative and limited power to “pressure inmates into granting sexual favors.”<sup>36</sup>

The ambiguous nature of sexual bartering created issues for the women who did survive. Prisoners widely reported instances of bartering within the camps, to the point that many people assumed that any woman who survived the Holocaust had only lived because they chose to have sex with SS officers or prisoners for some food or good.<sup>37</sup> Choices made in a life or death situation were not acknowledged as bravery or a path to survival, instead their actions were condemned without examining the coercion behind some of these “choices” or the motivation behind these arrangements.<sup>38</sup> The incredibly limited agency that women had employed in these

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<sup>35</sup> Earl and Schleunes, *Lessons and Legacies XI*, 60.

<sup>36</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 103.

<sup>37</sup> Agassi, *Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück*, 256.

<sup>38</sup> Hedgepeth and Sidel, *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, 276.

circumstances was later used to alienate and reject these women from society at the end of World War II, but also served to stigmatize all forms of sexual assault that occurred following the war.

### **Forced Prostitution**

The category of forced prostitution is especially relevant to an examination of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, as many prisoners from Ravensbrück were forced to “work” in brothels. Heinrich Himmler issued an order to establish brothels within concentration camps, known as *Sonderbauten*, after an inspection of the Mauthausen concentration camp in April 1941.<sup>39</sup> He believed that offering male prisoners the opportunity to visit a brothel would act as an incentive to work hard and meet quotas. Brothels were constructed in several camps between 1942 and 1945 with the largest one located in Auschwitz.<sup>40</sup> Oswald Pohl, the head of the SS Central Office of Economic Administration (*Wirtschaftsverwaltungshauptamt*), issued brothel regulations limiting their use to inmates who were either ethnic Germans or “Aryan” in appearance.<sup>41</sup> The Regulation on the Granting of Privileges to Prisoners or the Decree on Bonuses, granted prisoners visits to a camp brothel as a reward for special work performance beginning on May 15, 1943.<sup>42</sup> These brothels did not only serve as incentives or rewards for hard work, but also functioned as a “test of renunciation” for male prisoners convicted of homosexuality under Paragraph 175 of the criminal code.<sup>43</sup> Vera Laska explains, “Himmler, who wanted to eradicate homosexuals ‘root and branch,’ had the idea to ‘cure’ them by mandatory visits to the camp brothel at Flossenbürg. Ten Ravensbrück women provided the services with little success.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Herzog, *Lessons and Legacies VII*, 171.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Rittner and Roth, *Women and the Holocaust*, 262.

While Ravensbrück itself did not have a brothel, the majority of women forced to work in the brothels of other camps were originally imprisoned at Ravensbrück. When the first camp brothels opened in 1942, female prisoners were “recruited” from Ravensbrück with the promise of release after six months service.<sup>45</sup> This promise was not kept and women who worked in the brothels for six months, or became sick or pregnant, were either sent back to Ravensbrück or transported to another camp such as Auschwitz.<sup>46</sup> Erika Buchman, a block elder in Ravensbrück, noted that women who returned from the brothel were typically sent to a punishment block and if they had a venereal disease or were pregnant, were exterminated.<sup>47</sup>

Distinguishing this category as “forced prostitution” rather than “prostitution” is integral to both accuracy and preservation of dignity. “Prostitution” implies both choice and agency on the part of the women. While many of the women who volunteered or were chosen to work in the camp brothels had previous prostitution arrests or convictions, choices made prior to their imprisonment do not indicate willingness or consent within the camps. The characterization of prisoners forced to work in camp brothels as willing participants has created both complication and controversy for scholars by reducing their identity to that of a prostitute and not a victim. As Christa Schikorra explains, “When these women are remembered as ‘prostitutes’ rather than as prisoners who worked in forced prostitution, this characterization reinforces the original stigma presumed by the construct of ‘the asocial,’ which accepted as a given that women who worked in these commandos had been prostitutes prior to their incarceration or that they had been classified as ‘asocial’ as a result of ‘promiscuous behavior’.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Herzog, *Lessons and Legacies VII*, 12.

<sup>46</sup> Rittner and Roth, *Women and the Holocaust*, 262.

<sup>47</sup> Herzog, *Lessons and Legacies VII*, 174.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

The Nazi's perception of prostitution fluctuated greatly from the beginning of their time in power. At first, their public denouncement of all forms of prostitution was intended to be a conservative response to the Weimar Law for Combating Venereal Disease of 1927 which had abolished state-regulated prostitution and granted prostitutes increased independence.<sup>49</sup> When the Nazis began to incarcerate prostitutes prior to 1937, it was on the basis of enforcing Weimar policy rather than carrying out Nazi policies.<sup>50</sup> In the years leading up to 1937, the Nazis maintained their stance on upholding purity and morality in order to garner the support of political conservatives and church members. However, in 1937 and beyond, Nazi policy began to shift, aiming to reinstate state-regulated prostitution rather than ending the industry altogether.

The laws regarding racial defilement limited the number of women who could be placed on the brothel work detail. Jewish women, for example, were not typically used for the brothels because sex between Germans and Jews were prohibited. The Nazis turned to their German and Polish prisoners in order to fill camp brothels. While some of the women forced to work in the brothels, were political prisoners, Nazi officers preferred to use women who had been arrested and imprisoned for prostitution.<sup>51</sup> Originally female SS guards monitored these brothels. However, in late 1943 these SS guards were replaced by other prisoners, including *puffmatters* and brothel madams. An order from the SS Central Office of Economic Administration noted this change in policy, "In place of guards, older female prisoners are to be employed in the special constructions. At Ravensbrück...there are a number of experienced female prisoners available who have already managed brothels."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Roos, "Backlash against Prostitutes' Rights," 69.

<sup>50</sup> Victoria Harris, "The Role of the Concentration Camp in the Nazi Repression of Prostitutes, 1933-9," *The Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11 no. ½ (January-April 2002): 687.

<sup>51</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 104.

<sup>52</sup> Herzog, *Lessons and Legacies VII*, 172.

Jewish prisoner Rose Szywic Warner was asked in an interview following liberation if she had been aware of sexual abuse occurring while she was imprisoned in Ravensbrück. Warner responded, “Not I. I didn’t experience things like this. I didn’t even know. I knew that the Germans talking to us was a *Rassenschande*. How could they do something like this? I knew [about] it because people, other people, lived that through. They were in ‘puffhouses,’ you know, like whorehouses. I didn’t know about it. I thought it was a *Rassenschande*.”<sup>53</sup> Warner, and many Jewish prisoners in Ravensbrück, did not realize that sexual abuse was occurring. It is important to note that sexual actions that did not involve genital penetration would most likely not fall under *Rassenschande*. “Indeed, acts that did not involve genital intercourse and were thus outside the sphere of reproduction – such as enforced disrobement, sexual humiliation, sexual torture, rape with fingers and hands, rape with non-body objects – were likely to be interpreted as acts that did not violate Nazi laws.”<sup>54</sup> As Nomi Levenkron argues, the Nazis viewed Jewish women as “both sexual objects and as a biological danger, as it is women’s wombs that bear future generations.”<sup>55</sup>

Officers and guards strictly regulated forced prostitution within the camps. The women originally from Ravensbrück were tested regularly for venereal disease. However, even with consistent testing, it did not stop some women from contracting sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>56</sup> Alongside STDs, pregnancy also resulted from forced prostitution and frequent unprotected sex. While most women became temporarily infertile due to the harsh conditions and bad health, the women assigned to the brothel detail were typically the healthiest or newest arrivals to the camp.

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<sup>53</sup> Rose Szywic Warner, interview by Randy M. Goldman, September 12, 1994. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504754>.

<sup>54</sup> Earl and Schleunes, *Lessons and Legacies XI*, 39.

<sup>55</sup> Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, 15.

<sup>56</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 104.

Once brought to the brothel they were no longer expected to perform harsh labor and were given additional food to eat. These bettered living conditions increased their risk of pregnancy. Frau W. testified concerning the conditions of these brothels stating, “We didn’t have to work when we had our periods. Once a prisoner became pregnant. Her child was taken away...Then she left. We weren’t given any birth control.”<sup>57</sup> The women were under constant surveillance, with each room containing a peephole for the SS. Women were expected to service eight men every evening. Prisoner Frau D. explained, “...we felt like robots...We were only good for this. There was no conversation, no small talk...Everything was mechanical and indifferent. After a while, we began to get undressed and go through the motions automatically.”<sup>58</sup>

The development of military brothels was declared to be “an urgent necessity” by the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht in February of 1936.<sup>59</sup> Nazi ideology and its moral stance to eradicate prostitution and venereal disease appears to blatantly contradict their development of brothels and state regulated prostitution. Timm explains away this apparent contradiction, “although Nazi rhetoric still insisted that VD policies were aimed at limiting fertility-destroying diseases, wartime policy sacrificed a concern with fecundity to the war effort, deploying female sexual services (in terms of both motherhood and prostitution) and male sexual energies to increase the regime’s military might. Sex was thus viewed as entirely purposeful.”<sup>60</sup>

Jewish women were not typically part of the brothels created within the concentration camps. Racial policy was strictly enforced within the brothels. However, there are several records of Jewish women forced into military brothels. Military brothels were not only for German soldiers or the SS, but also for foreign soldiers and workers. The foreign workers were

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>59</sup> Timm, “Sex with a Purpose,” 238.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 254.

not held to the same racial defilement laws as the Germans thus, Jewish women were recruited for the brothels to service soldiers. There is a significant amount of documentation of Jewish women being abducted from ghettos to work in military brothels, especially in France. One woman recounted how her two friends, recruited for the military brothels, acquired venereal diseases from their time there.<sup>61</sup> Helene Sennreich argues that “the effects of service in military brothels were devastating. The multiple rapes that women endured there damaged them psychologically and physically. In some cases, women’s reproductive organs were so damaged that they could not bear children afterward.”<sup>62</sup>

Postwar accounts regarding the existence of these brothels were often sensationalized and presented in sexually explicit detail for “popular titillation,” reflecting a “macabre postwar misuse of the Holocaust.”<sup>63</sup> Exploitative and pornographic films were also referred to as part of the “sexploitation” and more specifically “Nazisploitation” genre were financially successful and developed a cult following. Novellas such as *House of Dolls* describes groups of Jewish women held in concentration camps for the sexual pleasure of Nazi soldiers as “Joy Divisions”. This novella, as well as films such as *Love Camp 7* which is set in a concentration camp named “Joy Division”, connected the sexual violence of the brothel to pornography and propagated the idea that many Jewish women were chosen to work in the brothels despite racial hygiene, the threat of *Rassenschande*, and the strict racial regulation within the brothels. These exploitative descriptions of camp brothels served to reinforce the victims’ identities as prostitutes by blatantly

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<sup>61</sup> Fela Fonti-Grynbaum, interview 39064 by USC Shoah Foundation Institute, March 3, 1998.

<sup>62</sup> Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, 117.

<sup>63</sup> Herzog, *Lessons and Legacies VII*, 231.

sexualizing the victims. As Ronit Lentin notes, "...*House of Dolls* represents violence and sexuality in a manner which borders on the pornographic."<sup>64</sup>

### **Medical Experimentation and Reproductive Mutilation**

Sexual violence against women during World War II must be evaluated and categorized in order to distinguish between the varied forms and methods of sexual assault and fully examine these acts without cross-category comparison. This works to prevent value-based ranking between different forms of sexual violence and combats the idea that only fully penetrative genital rape could be categorized as sexual violence. Medical experimentation is one such distinctive category of sexual violence. While all forms of medical experimentation violated the bodily autonomy of the unwilling subjects, certain types of experimentation extend into sexual violation. The women of Ravensbrück were subject to extensive and invasive medical procedures. The women chosen for experimentation became known as the "lapin" or "rabbits," essentially translating from French to the English expression "guinea pigs." Primarily, these women had their legs cut open and samples of infection, pieces of trash, and glass were inserted into the wounds. They were then monitored to see how the infection spread. Sulfanilamide experiments for the treatment of infection were also conducted at Ravensbrück with the goal of determining if the drug could be utilized to improve the survival of German soldiers wounded in battle.<sup>65</sup>

Nazi experimentation intended to improve battlefield medical care for soldiers did eventually cross into the territory of sexual abuse with experiments conducted at Dachau concentration camp. Male prisoners at Dachau were subject to experiments involving freezing

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<sup>64</sup> Ronit Lentin, *Israel and the Daughters of the Shoah: Reoccupying the Territories of Silence* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), 41.

<sup>65</sup> Spitz, *Doctors from Hell*, 139.

water. Intended to develop a method to rescue and restore German pilots who landed in extremely cold water. These prisoners were held in water tanks with freezing cold water, entirely nude. Dr. Sigmund Rascher would then attempt different methods of raising their body temperature. The most effective method was placing the prisoner in a warm bath, but that did not stop Rascher from trying other methods. Himmler wrote to Rascher saying, “I can also imagine that a fisherman’s wife might take her half-frozen husband to bed with her after he had been rescued and warm him up that way.”<sup>66</sup> Upon Himmler’s insistence, Rascher requested female prisoners to be sent to Dachau as test subjects for the next stage of experimentation. After being held in freezing temperatures, the male prisoners were then placed in a bed between two naked female prisoners and under blankets. Helm explains, “the rate at which the men’s body temperature rose was about the same as if they had been warmed by packed blankets. ‘But in four cases the men performed an act of sexual intercourse with the women.’”<sup>67</sup>

Closely related to medical experimentation is reproductive mutilation. Reproductive mutilation encompasses the physical effects of surgery, rape, and infertility. In this category the distinction between male and female victims becomes more apparent as women were sent to gas chambers alongside their children while fathers were separated from children and not inextricably linked to them in this manner. As Sybil Milton explains, “Instead of the protection normally extended to these weaker individuals, women were more vulnerable and their chances of survival decreased if they were pregnant or accompanied by small children.”<sup>68</sup> Motherhood, and by connection womanhood, became a distinct disadvantage for survival during the Holocaust and ultimately reflects the genocidal aim of Nazi ideology.

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<sup>66</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 227.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>68</sup> Rittner and Roth, *Women and the Holocaust*, 227.

Nazis subjected many women to forced sterilization. Other prisoners were offered freedom if they would agree to their own sterilization and the sterilization of their children.<sup>69</sup> Prisoners such as Wanda P. recalled that she was told the sterilization procedure “was just an examination with an X-ray machine.”<sup>70</sup> Experimentation to develop a method of mass sterilization was intended to help maintain the master race, by preventing asocials such as the Romani from reproducing. Throughout the Holocaust, Dr. Carl Clauberg conducted medical experiments relating to female sterilization and performed sterilization surgeries on women in Ravensbrück.

Clauberg and his bloody legacy, at both Auschwitz and Ravensbrück, exemplifies the escalation of violence and violation of the Hippocratic Oath by previously upstanding medical professionals. As Robert Jay Lifton argues, “Even with his psychological aberrations, that is, Clauberg might under a different regime have found a life pattern with a manageable mixture of accomplishment, arrogance, and corruption...Nazi institutions provided the ideal climates for nourishing Clauberg’s compensatory grandiosity and psychopathic tendencies.”<sup>71</sup> However, Clauberg also demonstrated the inextricable connection between medical science, genetics, and eugenics during this period of time.

Clauberg began his work in the medical field as a gynecologist, but later became a professor. He conducted research on female hormones in order to prepare for the production of Progynon and Prolution by the Schering-Kahlbaum Pharmaceutical company. These drugs were intended to combat and treat female infertility. In 1942, Clauberg was introduced to Heinrich

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<sup>69</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 52-53.

<sup>70</sup> Heike Krokowski and Bianca Voigt, “Das Schicksal von Wanda P. – Zur Verfolgung der Sinti und Roma” (1994), 263.

<sup>71</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1986), 278.

Himmler and the direction of his research, and his life, shifted dramatically. Clauberg utilized his knowledge as a gynecologist and his previous research regarding female infertility and reproduction to begin researching non-surgical methods of mass sterilization. This research resulted in his appointment to the chief of an institution known as the “City of Mothers” and mass sterilization experiments on women in both Auschwitz and Ravensbrück. Himmler eventually ordered Clauberg to find a method of mass sterilization.<sup>72</sup>

While Clauberg performed the majority of his operations and tests at Auschwitz, he moved to Ravensbrück in 1944 under Himmler’s direct orders.<sup>73</sup> Here Clauberg continued his experimentation by sterilizing the large Romi population held at Ravensbrück as quickly as possible. Clauberg utilized several methods of sterilization including more standard surgical procedures, but mainly experimented on his victims. One method of sterilization was an injection of chemicals directly into a woman’s uterus. Clauberg then watched the fallopian tubing close in on itself through X-rays.<sup>74</sup> Others were sterilized utilizing a high-powered X-ray machine radiating the reproductive organs. Clauberg also attempted sterilization with a “high tension apparatus” where an electrode was placed inside of the victim’s vagina and the other electrode over the abdominal wall.<sup>75</sup> During this mass sterilization, Clauberg performed his operation on women who had already been sterilized at another point during the war, as well as on young girls. Children as young as eight were subject to sterilization. At least two of these children died as a result of the sterilization, spending their last moments in agony bleeding from the uterus.<sup>76</sup> The parents of these young children were told that if they agreed to the operation, their children

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<sup>72</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 480.

<sup>73</sup> Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 271.

<sup>74</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 480.

<sup>75</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 53.

<sup>76</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 481.

would then be freed. According to British war crime investigators, “between Christmas 1944 and February 1945 500 Romani women were sterilized at Ravensbrück, including 200 young girls.”<sup>77</sup>

Aside from sterilization experiments, the very nature of life in the concentration camps had a profoundly negative effect on female reproduction and fertility sometimes resulting in permanent infertility. Most women experienced one final menstrual cycle after arriving in the camp, but because of the hard labor and lack of food, menstruation ceased. Women were not provided with hygienic materials for when they were menstruating.<sup>78</sup> Female prisoners worked to support those who still experienced menstruation until the outset of amenorrhea, or an abnormal absence of menstruation. This obviously caused a great number of issues for prisoners with only one set of bedding and clothing. Selma recalls feeling relieved when she stopped menstruating saying, “at least it was one less thing to worry about in those unhygienic conditions.”<sup>79</sup> Some prisoners remembered SS staff feeding them chemicals to ingest in order to stop them from having a menstrual cycle. Please note that this powder has not been identified by a name or confirmed that it was used for this purpose. Rose Szywicz Warner explained this phenomenon,

We didn't have our period time because they put something in your food so that we weren't women. Because I worked later in the kitchen and I know that we were putting in, it was very bitter, what we were putting in. It was...I don't remember the name of it. It was like a powder and you put that powder into the soup and we ate that. And so a woman wasn't a woman... We didn't have periods. We were young...and we never, being there, we didn't even think about what if we were going to live, we didn't know if we were going to live through it. If we would live through it that we were going to be able to have children, to bear children... They took away our dignity. They took away everything you have in life.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, 210.

<sup>79</sup> van de Perre, *My Name is Selma*, 153.

<sup>80</sup> Rose Szywic Warner, interview by Randy M. Goldman, September 12, 1994.

Other prisoners related similar experiences. Dora Freilich recalled that, “they [the Nazis] put stuff in the food that took the menstruation away right away. We did not have it all through the time that we were in the concentration camp.”<sup>81</sup>

Amenorrhea resulting from traumatic physical circumstances can lead to permanent infertility. Typically, amenorrhea is reversible and causes only temporary infertility. Once a woman recovered physically, she would most likely recommence her menstrual cycle and be capable of bearing children. However, low estrogen levels could also lead to osteoporosis and in the event that other organs were irreparably damaged, carrying a healthy pregnancy to term would be difficult. Some survivors reported being told by their doctors following liberation that it would be unlikely for them to ever conceive.<sup>82</sup>

Permanent infertility could result from untreated venereal diseases, botched abortions, and the physical trauma of repeated rape. Sterilization had lasting consequences on a woman’s reproductive abilities. For most women, the procedure caused lasting physical pain and for those who were not fully sterilized, abnormal menstruation. Women who contracted venereal diseases, whether through rape, forced prostitution, sexual bartering, or consensual sex were typically not treated.<sup>83</sup> These diseases left untreated often resulted in sterilization or reduced fertility. The reality at Ravensbrück was that even the abortions forced upon women by the Nazis were performed by officers or prisoners without knowledge of female anatomy or experience performing abortions.<sup>84</sup> The trauma of repeated rape could also result in irreversible damage to a woman’s organs, preventing them from having children.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Dora Freilich, interview by Helen Grassman, October 24, 1984.  
<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508628>

<sup>82</sup> van de Perre, *My Name is Selma*, 153.

<sup>83</sup> Rittner and Roth, *Women and the Holocaust*, 262.

<sup>84</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 110.

<sup>85</sup> Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, 117.

### Abortion and Infanticide

An additional category of sexual violence is closely related to both medical experimentation and reproductive mutilation, but warrants its own individual classification. The term ‘childdeath’ was coined at Ravensbrück in conjunction with childbirth. The women who came to Ravensbrück visibly with child during 1939, were typically allowed to carry the pregnancy to full-term. At the beginning of the war, pregnant women were sometimes sent to a nearby hospital to give birth. The newborns were taken away from their mothers and the women were brought back to the camp.<sup>86</sup> This forcible removal of newborn children from their mother was another form of sexual violence. Women who had just given birth were producing milk in order to feed their babies. Hanna Sturm recalls a Romani woman who was placed in solitary confinement and straitjacketed because she “had been driven wild because her six-week-old baby had been torn out of her arms. The woman was breastfeeding, and her breasts had grown swollen and hard, which added to her pain.”<sup>87</sup> This unnamed Romani woman was found dead in her cell several hours later. Women who gave birth after spending an extended amount of time within the camp typically could not produce their own milk because their physical condition had deteriorated. Ilse Reibmayr recalled, “when the mothers needed to produce milk, of course, they could not.”<sup>88</sup>

The starvation of babies was a method of both infanticide as well as psychological torture for the mothers. Nazi officers chose to deliberately starve the newborn babies held at Ravensbrück. Dr. Percival Treite received orders immediately following the first live births at Ravensbrück to stop providing extra portions of milk and porridge to the new mothers and their

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<sup>86</sup> Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 270.

<sup>87</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 42.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 416.

children. As Helm points out, “the deliberate starving of babies was a long-established Nazi technique of killing. Baby starvation was first carried out during the euthanasia killings in 1939, when physically or mental handicapped babies were deliberately left to die.”<sup>89</sup> Hermann Pfanmüller was an early proponent of committing infanticide by starvation. He argued that starvation was a “simpler and more natural” way for the baby to die with a slow reduction of rations rather than an immediate and total withdrawal of food.<sup>90</sup>

However, as the war progressed, forced abortions and the immediate execution of pregnant prisoners became more common at Ravensbrück. Forced abortions became standard procedure for pregnant prisoners beginning in 1943. The termination of a pregnancy could cause irreparable damage to the uterus and fallopian tubes if conducted in a hasty or violent manner. For those women who became pregnant while imprisoned in the camps, or for those who arrived and were not visibly pregnant, Nazis forced them to abort their babies. A favored prisoner known as Schwester Lisa was appointed to perform some of the abortions, and oftentimes, botched them. Erika Buchmann remembered Lisa forcing her to examine the body of a woman who had died during an abortion, “Sister Lisa demanded that I come and look at what had happened. I refused but Schwester Lisa got hold of my arm and threw me in front of the bed tore the sheet off the body and I was forced to see what I did not see. I believe that a woman cannot do worse towards living or dead than what Schwester Lisa had done. It was sheer sadism.”<sup>91</sup>

Other women chose to perform their own makeshift abortions with the assistance of other prisoners.<sup>92</sup> Most believed that their baby would be killed immediately after their birth. Others

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>92</sup> Hedgpeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, 162.

would rather their child be dead than born in a prison.<sup>93</sup> Other women assumed that being pregnant would put them at risk for immediate extermination. Those who did not attempt a makeshift abortion sometimes drowned or suffocated their baby after birth.<sup>94</sup> This was a difficult situation where women made decisions in order to protect themselves or their living children and to save their newborn from a painful, and most likely, brief life of suffering. Again this is a choice in a choiceless circumstance. Women exercised limited agency making choices that they would most likely have never made if they had not been persecuted or imprisoned by the Nazis. Helga Amesberger argues that social expectations for women, and mothers in particular, had a drastic effect on how women's actions within the concentration camps were viewed at the end of the war. She explains,

Mothers who made sacrifices for the sake of their children adhered to the traditional expectations that mothers will place their child's life before their own. Women whose actions ran counter to this model, who placed their own life above that of the child and had an abortion, or who took newborn babies away from their mothers and killed them to save the mother's life, were sometimes stigmatized after World War II, their actions categorized as morally reprehensible<sup>95</sup>

The murder of newborn babies by camp officers, or fellow prisoners under orders, was another attack on motherhood. Susan Benedict has conducted extensive research on the nurses of Ravensbrück. She argues that after the first year the camp was open, prisoners were no longer sent outside of the camp to give birth. During the fall of 1944 many pregnant women arrived in Ravensbrück and the official policy changed to allow women to give birth within the camp. Benedict states that,

births took place in Ravensbrück, and then the infants were strangled by the prisoner nurses. One horrifying account claims that one of the nurses burned the babies' bodies in a boiler room. Germaine Tillion...provided an eyewitness report from Ravensbrück,

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> van de Perre, *My Name is Selma*, 139.

<sup>95</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 110.

stating that women who gave birth were forced to witness their infants being smothered or drowned in a bucket...<sup>96</sup>

Gemma LaGuardia Gluck mentions the pregnant women in Ravensbrück and the fate of their babies. She stated, "I used to hear the screams of the mothers in labor and the wails of the newborn, most of whom were to die very shortly...Once I saw a Nazi guard carrying a bag slung over his shoulder. 'Know what I have here?' he asked pointing to the bag. 'Dead babies.'"<sup>97</sup>

Other babies did not survive birth due to the physical deterioration of their mothers. Nelly Langholm remembered seeing a woman give birth in the middle of the camp street. She said, "As I turned to go I saw a woman on the ground and stared at her. She was giving birth to a child, right there, and I watched. I was only twenty, and had never seen a woman giving birth, and she was giving birth there in the filth of the camp street...But the baby didn't go anywhere. The baby died right there. Of that I'm sure."<sup>98</sup> Charlotte Müller was assigned to be a plumber as her work detail. She recounts attempting to remove a clog for several days, until finally removing the body of a dead infant saying, "After days of pumping, the body of a newborn baby was pulled out of the sewage drain adjacent to the tent of the Hungarian Jewish women. 'Was the baby born dead? Did he die shortly after birth, or did the mother kill him herself, to spare him an agonizing death from hunger?'"<sup>99</sup> A record of births in Ravensbrück between the fall of 1944 to April 1945 reveals that 560 children were born. Of those births, "23 women delivered prematurely, 20 had stillborn babies, and 5 suffered miscarriages. For 266 children a date of death is given in the same book that records their birth."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Susan Benedict, "The Nadir of Nursing: Nurse-perpetrators of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp," *Nursing History Review* 2 (2003): 129-146.

<sup>97</sup> Gluck, *Fiorello's Sister*, 47.

<sup>98</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 465.

<sup>99</sup> Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, 19.

<sup>100</sup> Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, 142.

## Rape

Many of the female survivors of Ravensbrück who were either interviewed or authored memoirs do not discuss their own sexual assaults. Instead, they describe the experiences of the other women they lived or traveled with, or simply describe a situation that “a friend” lived through. It is important to note that reports of rape by the SS or male staff were much more frequent in other concentration camps, such as the women’s camp at Auschwitz. While it is highly improbable that no women were raped by either SS or staff in Ravensbrück, rape may have occurred rather infrequently in part because of the limited male presence in the camp. However, male guards, SS, doctors, and high ranking officials did visit and work in the camp, meaning that there was opportunity for such violence to occur.

One prisoner, named Sara, testified to her rape while in Ravensbrück. Sara recounted a woman removing her from the barracks, giving her candy, and bringing her to a small room. She said,

[T]here were two men there and there were some other people in the room I think. I was put on a table. From what I remember, [it was] a table or it could have been a high table. I was very little so it seemed like it was very high up from where I was and I was very violently sexually abused. And I remember being hit, I remember crying and I wanted to get out of there. And I was calling people and screaming and I remember one thing that stands out in my mind that one of them told me that they would stand me up on my head and cut me right in half. And they wanted me to stop screaming and I’ve had nightmares about that most of my life <sup>101</sup>

Unfortunately for the prisoners of Ravensbrück, liberation did not relieve their suffering. The Nazis forced the remaining women in the camp on death marches as the Allied Forces approached from Germany. The main camp itself was liberated by Soviet troops on April 30, 1945.<sup>102</sup> The Russian soldiers who arrived first were not under real leadership and conducted

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>102</sup> Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, 24.

themselves accordingly. These liberators forced themselves on the German women living in the surrounding towns while approaching and departing Ravensbrück. Pascale Bos explains, “Soviet troops not only raped German women, but also Jewish women when they were being liberated from concentration camps or emerged from hiding.”<sup>103</sup>

Krystyna Zajac was among the first prisoners to encounter the liberating Russian soldiers. She says, “Immediately they saw us they chased us [sic]. A Russian said he wanted to dance with me. Then they tried to rape us. I fell down. They even tried to get my mother and to rape her. We said we were Poles, not Germans, and we were prisoners, but they didn’t care.”<sup>104</sup> Ilse Heinrich witnessed the Russian rampage through the camp from her bed and, “saw Soviet soldiers, drunk, and bent on raping even the women who were sick and dying.”<sup>105</sup> Czech prisoner doctor Zdenka Nedvedova reported these rapes to Russian officers once they arrived at the camp. Helm explains, “Zdenka immediately went to the senior Soviet officer, Major Sergej Bulanov – a doctor, who was much respected – pleading for help. Bulanov must have quickly established that the men had done far more than threaten women, because after a short time the prisoners heard shots. ‘And the next morning we learned that the soldiers had been executed,’ recalled Zdenka.”<sup>106</sup> Women such as Georgette Reisman, liberated from a subcamp of Ravensbrück, also recounted violent encounters with Russian soldiers, “not every Russian was very nice. One raped me after the war. He was probably drunk and I was close by so he got me and raped me...So that’s how it started, my life, after camp, that I was raped by a Russian. But I saved my

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<sup>103</sup> Earl and Schleunes, *Lessons and Legacies XI*, 60.

<sup>104</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 618.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 624.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

sister with it. Otherwise he would have raped her. So I had myself. She was still intact. I was not intact. So I thought it was better me than her.”<sup>107</sup>

Even after liberation women who had experienced some sort of sexual violence typically did not come forward with their stories. Pascale Bos explains that, “female sexuality was still couched within the discourse of moral decent and respectability in which ‘decent girls were virgins and future wives,’ and ‘respectable wives were mother and future mothers’ and women had the duty to protect their chastity. Rape was easily blamed on the victim and could lead to the accusation of adultery.”<sup>108</sup> The society that survivors reentered was hostile to women who had seemingly offered up their virtue in exchange for their lives. Mühlhäuser writes, “every woman was a potential rape victim – an experience that was associated with shame. In a bizarre twist, women became the guilty ones, responsible for the soiled honor of their families. So for this reason as well, women may have felt the need to convince their family, friends, or community members that sexual violence had not taken place.”<sup>109</sup>

Micheline Maurel, imprisoned in the Neubrandenburg subcamp of Ravensbrück, authored a memoir relating her experiences. She describes her return home and the questions that she was asked; “the questions I was asked were always the same: ‘Tell me, were you raped?’”<sup>110</sup> Maurel recounted her liberation and the repeated rape of her friends, Michelle and Renée, but maintains that “the only reason she wasn’t raped was that she persuaded the soldiers that her sores were deadly and infectious.” Maurel’s memoir demonstrates the realities surrounding survivors reporting rape. Goldenberg states that “in the preponderance of memoirs by women,

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<sup>107</sup> Georgette Reisman, interview by Ilona Vogel, August 23, 1990.  
<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn43300>.

<sup>108</sup> Earl and Schleunes, *Lessons and Legacies XI*, 65.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>110</sup> Micheline Maurel, *An Ordinary Camp* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1958), 136-137.

sex-based abuse is seldom reported in the first person...it is likely that many women were too embarrassed to reveal their personal exposure to such abuse. This distancing from direct personal experience was exacerbated by the fact that at least two decades passed before there was widespread interest in the survivors and even less interest in women survivors.”<sup>111</sup>

Ravensbrück provides an effective case study for the different forms of sexual violence perpetrated against women during the Holocaust. While each concentration camp was different, these proposed categorizations of sexual violence, based on primary source accounts from Ravensbrück, can be applied to other concentration camps. Distinguishing between different forms of sexual violence during the Holocaust provides a more accurate and nuanced portrayal of the atrocities committed against humanity. Examining the variations of sexual violence not only creates a more complete history of these events, but also allows for further research into more intimate attacks on personhood. Distinguishing between violence such as rape and bartering allows for further exploration into the topic and the expansion of these categories. Acknowledging the dehumanizing atrocities committed during the Holocaust recognizes the depth of degradation and suffering that both men and women experienced. Creating additional categories of sexual violence such as sexual molestation, medical experimentation, and reproductive mutilation prevents an ahistorical projection of morality on the actions taken by the victims of these atrocities and combats the idea that an attack that was not penetrative genital rape is not a form of sexual violence.

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<sup>111</sup> Goldenberg and Shapiro, *Different Horrors, Same Hell*, 120.

## Conclusion

As the war drew to a close and the Allied forces approached, the Nazis began to dissolve concentration camps and evacuate the remaining populations. Between August and September of 1944, roughly 27,600 women were sent to Ravensbrück from eastern camps.<sup>1</sup> The number of prisoners increased dramatically in early 1945 with the evacuation of Auschwitz, reaching a total of 45,000 prisoners.<sup>2</sup> The rapid expansion of the camp population contributed greatly to the deteriorating conditions within Ravensbrück. In late April 1945, SS guards led approximately 20,000 female prisoners on a march towards Mecklenberg. Soviet forces crossed paths with this group and liberated the prisoners. The remaining SS guards abandoned Ravensbrück on April 29. The next day the first group of Soviet soldiers arrived at the main camp, and on May 1, the regular units of the Soviet Army arrived to officially liberate the camp.<sup>3</sup>

Postwar trials held in several European countries resulted in convictions of several members of the Ravensbrück staff. Camp overseer Dorothea Binz was tried during the first of seven Hamburg Ravensbrück trials. She was one of four female defendants sentenced to death at the conclusion of their portion of the trial.<sup>4</sup> Carmen Mory, nicknamed ‘The Monster’ and a *kapo* notorious for mistreating her fellow inmates, was sentenced to death at the conclusion of the same trial. She committed suicide on April 9, 1947.<sup>5</sup> The commandants of Ravensbrück faced similar fates. Captured by United States forces, former Ravensbrück commandant Max Koegel committed suicide while in prison.<sup>6</sup> Tried by a French military court in 1949, commandant Fritz

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<sup>1</sup> Megargee, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 1,194.

<sup>2</sup> “Ravensbrück: Liberation and Postwar Trials,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ravensbrueck-liberation-and-postwar-trials?series=36>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Michael J. Bazyler and Frank M. Tuerkheimer, *Forgotten Trials of the Holocaust* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014), 143.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “Ravensbrück: Liberation and Postwar Trials.”

Suhren, along with the director of forced labor, Hans Pflaum, were both sentenced to death and executed.<sup>7</sup>

The path to Ravensbrück, and its eventual liberation, truly began with the Nazi Party's extreme conservative retaliation to the liberalizing culture of Weimar Republic. An examination of the sex reform movement during the Weimar Republic reveals a society more willing to discuss 'private' topics, such as sex and sexuality, in the public sphere. The sex reform movement emphasized mutual pleasure, and some leaders advocated for the decriminalization of both abortion and homosexuality. The Weimar Republic achieved some of its political goals including the end of state-regulated prostitution and the reduction of abortion to a misdemeanor offense. Women experienced newfound political influence through women's emancipation, as well as through their participation in political movements such as the fight to decriminalize abortion. The struggles, goals, and cultural pastimes of the Weimar era juxtaposed with the policies of the Third Reich demonstrate how the Nazi Party targeted different ideas for either eradication or adoption. For example, the Nazi Party embraced the burgeoning eugenic theories and criminal justice reform contemplated during the Weimar era while rejecting the entrance of women into the public sphere.

Backlash to the liberalization of the Weimar Republic resulted in the Nazis making changes to the criminal justice system allowing for the classification and indefinite incarceration of asocials and the racial inferior. Romani, criminals, prostitutes, and lesbians, among others, were arrested and held without opportunity for release. As the Nazis began to pursue their Final Solution, more people were arrested and transported to concentration camps. This policy of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

indefinite incarceration led directly to the arrival of women classified as asocials in the Ravensbrück concentration camp.

In addition to changes to the criminal justice system, Nazi policy regarding every aspect of sexuality was an essential portion of the Third Reich's governing program. While some of the propaganda and policies enacted under the Third Reich resulted in sexual repression, this was not the case for everyone under Nazi rule. The 'racially pure' were encouraged to engage in sexual activity in order to increase the population, while those who were deemed undesirable were not only prevented from sexual intercourse, but also reproduction. Ultimately, female sexuality was commodified to serve the state. Women who were 'racially pure' were expected to reproduce, while women such as prostitutes served the state by providing services in the returning state-controlled brothels. The social issues of promiscuity, pornography, and prostitution effectively demonstrate the contradictions within Nazi propaganda and policy regarding morality and the extreme ambiguity of the Nazi's moral purification platform. The Nazi Party successfully enacted policies which furthered their ultimate goals under the guise of conservatism and morality until it was no longer politically necessary. Within each of the contradictions surrounding promiscuity, pornography, and prostitution resides the ultimate consistency of Nazi ideology, the division of both race and gender into superior and inferior categorizations.

It is important to note that while many women forced to work in the camp brothels did not speak about their experiences, others have fought to be officially recognized as victims of Nazism. As Christa Schikorra explains, "the assumption that the women were themselves to blame for their fate has served to deny their claim to recognition and rehabilitation."<sup>8</sup> The suffering of these women did not end after liberation. Their abuse was largely dismissed as a

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<sup>8</sup> Herzog, *Lessons and Legacies VII*, 176.

consequence of their own actions, and they faced harsh judgment from other survivors as well as the general public. Not only have these women have not received acknowledgement or compensation, their experiences have been mocked, disparaged, parodied, and utilized to further a connection between violence, sexuality, and pornography. Scholars must address the suffering these women faced while combating popular myths about camp brothels and condemn the continued exploitation and sexualization of women forced to work as prostitutes by the Nazis.

As Sarah Helm has argued, the history of Ravensbrück is worthy of sharing outside of a collective Holocaust historiography.<sup>9</sup> Recent scholarship has begun to address the complexities of Ravensbrück. While many authors explore different aspects of the camp or the prisoners, there is a general scholarly consensus on the value and necessity of further research. Due to its status as the only concentration camp designated for women, Ravensbrück functions as an exemplary case study of the sexual violence experienced by women within the Nazi concentration camps. Analyzing the prisoner demographics and examining survivor memoirs and interviews reveals the extent of sexual violence perpetrated against women within Ravensbrück. Specific acts recorded in these primary sources demonstrate the necessity for specific categorizations of sexual violence. Classifying the forms of sexual violence against women allows historians to acknowledge the different experiences of prisoners without qualitatively comparing their suffering of one another. These categories encourage further comprehensive examination of sexual violence outside of penetrative genital rape, addresses historical sensationalism, and clarifies misconceptions regarding sexual violence. The specific categories of sexual humiliation, molestation, sexual extortion, forced prostitution, medical experimentation and reproductive

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<sup>9</sup> Helm, *Ravensbrück*, 650.

mutilation, abortion and infanticide, and rape emphasize the collective experience unique to women as well as the singular experiences of individual prisoners held in Ravensbrück.

This thesis fills a gap in the historiography of Ravensbrück. The women of Ravensbrück experienced many forms of sexual violation, each of which deserves to be acknowledged individually as well as collectively. The seven categories examined in this thesis serve to distinguish different forms of sexual violence without comparison or assigning an order of importance or severity. These categories and subsequent analysis address a deficiency in the overall historiography of both Ravensbrück and the Holocaust. A thorough examination of all aspects of sexual violence provides an effective method for acknowledging all forms of suffering. This thesis separates the forms of sexual violence perpetrated against women into different categories, providing a more holistic view of the experiences of the women prisoners at Ravensbrück. The application of these categories and method of study to other concentration camps with female populations lays the groundwork for additional comprehensive research on sexual violence against women in all areas of historical examination and continued discussion on Ravensbrück and its complicated history.

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