

**“When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany”**  
(Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, Marion Kaplan, editors. New Feminist Library, 1984.)  
Report for National Mobilization for Reproductive Justice, April 2023

Prepared and presented by Susan Massey, Phoenix

## **Preface**

There is far too much information in this book to share in one 10 minute report; for a fuller picture, personal study of this book is highly recommended. However, we will focus on the broad landscape of reproductive control in Germany post-WWI and into WWII. For this report I mainly drew on these three essays from the book: “Beyond *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*: Weimar Women in Politics and Work” by Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, “Abortion and Economic Crisis: The 1931 Campaign against Paragraph 218” by Atina Grossman, and “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization, and the State” by Gisela Bock.

Additionally, the book focuses on the experience of “women.” I want to highlight that this group likely includes people who might now identify as trans men or other gender identities, but who presented as women for their own safety. Gender affirmation surgery was pioneered in Germany before the Nazis came to power, but was not widely accessible. Our present inability to identify those who may have been hiding their true selves should not lead to their erasure from the picture that follows.

## **Introduction**

“A close look at the history addressed in this volume alerts us to the dangers signaled by well-financed, well-organized movements in command of the latest propaganda techniques that, then and now, mobilize around such code words as “pro-family,” “abortion,” “homosexuality,” “pornography,” “patriotism,” and “military strength” We want to stress that Nazism did not arrive full blown, with promises of war and gas chambers. It came slowly, step by step, draped in the protective coloring of love for country, strong medicine for unemployment, and most importantly for our purposes, a pledge to restore the traditional family and relieve women of their double burden” – “A Note to Our Readers,” *When Biology Became Destiny*, p. xii

Leading up to the war, fascism had been immensely popular among the owning class in many nations, as can be seen with the rise of fascism in Italy and Spain and business magnates in the United States plotting their own (failed) fascist coup in the 1930s. And of course European fascists borrowed from the racist and genocidal policies of the U.S. as well (including Indian removal, enslavement and Jim Crow laws). It is no wonder then that so much of the above propaganda feels eerily familiar as these have been refined in the decades since.

To understand the rollout and adoption of reproductive control policies in Germany in the first half of the 20th century, we will begin with its implementation in Nazi Germany and then work backwards to what was happening before, which is in many ways parallel to our present times.

### **Nazi Germany - The interweaving of racism and sexism**

The rollout of the Nazi agenda for reproductive control kicked off in 1933, when laws were passed to amp up criminalization of abortion facilities and providers. Implementation of this law led to an increase in convictions for abortions, reaching about 7000 people convicted in 1938. Correspondingly, there is little evidence to suggest that Nazi anti-abortion policies increased birth rates (there is insufficient data to be sure, but numbers suggest only a return to rates seen before the last economic downturn). Underpinning the attack on abortion was the wish for more “desirable” babies to be produced to “build the nation” — that is until during WWII, when women were needed to work in the factories, and a pregnant working woman was deemed to be “selfish” for having a baby instead of doing her part for the war effort. Women were deprived of autonomy and pushed into whatever role seemed most expedient to the Nazis’ wishes at any particular moment in time. As such, some may have used pregnancy as a form of resistance, to get out of such work and in opposition to the war.

In 1934 the State Health offices of Gene and Race Care were established, which developed into an elaborate bureaucracy around reproduction. By ~1942, a worker’s pregnancy would be reported to the government, where an SS officer would decide the pregnancy outcome after genetic assessment. Those deemed “inferior” (racially, mentally &/or physically - including “out” LGBTQIA sexual minorities) would not only be forced to have an abortion but also sterilized.

Sterilization was also refined over that period. What started out as the more familiar procedures we might think of today progressed to “gonadectomy.” Such sterilization by destruction of the gonads, it was discovered, could be done very easily and efficiently through exposure *en masse* to x-ray radiation, which is particularly toxic to the ovaries and testes. No surgery needed. This mass sterilization of “undesirables” only ended upon the implementation of the “final solution” when it was more cost effective to skip that additional step in their genocide.

This is the horrific history that many of us have some awareness of; now let’s turn to the conditions and events preceding this period.

### **Weimar Germany**

The Republic of Germany was established in 1919, after the end of WWI (and the end of Imperial Germany). During its formation, the republic was led by the SPD (the German Social Democratic Party). There were several other political parties on the left and right as well as in the center — a Catholic party and a Communist party among them. *I am not able to get into a full political analysis here but want to give some context for what follows.*

Women had worked during the “Great War” and in the early days of the republic, two main women’s movements emerged: one a more left (socialist/communist), working-class women’s movement, and the other a liberal bourgeois women’s movement. These women had found fulfillment in being part of the wider world outside their homes and many were hoping to build upon that instead of returning to the status quo. Germany was economically devastated after the war and both Jews and women were frequently scapegoated. Women were blamed for men’s unemployment, though women did not in fact see the increased employment they had hoped for either.

In 1931, both strains of women’s movements organized against “Paragraph 218” of the German penal code, a holdover from 1871 under imperial Germany, which outlawed abortion. The communists had been campaigning some years prior to 1931, but that year is when the abortion campaign gained recognition as a popular movement. (Of course this was also the time when Mother’s Day was championed by the florist profession and right-wing political groups to promote and romanticize the traditional role of women. The holiday was formally established in Germany in 1933 under the Nazi regime.)

In the abortion legalization movement, the socialist, communist, and labor groups focused on the power of working women organizing together in solidarity, while the liberal bourgeois strain was more focused on “progress” and helping pitiful poor women burdened with too many hungry children. These different approaches led to conflict and disunity between the groups. Even more significantly, the existing union and political party structures failed to adequately bring women in and organize them effectively. As a result, the mass mobilization of women came to naught.

Women did not find the fulfilling roles in larger society that they had hoped to have in the years of the republic, either at work or in the unions and political parties. Although most voted for centrist parties — and it is perhaps surprising in retrospect since their hopes were so disappointed — a not small fraction of women really believed that they would finally have such roles under Nazi rule, leading to their support and complicity.

### **Lessons for us today**

The most important lesson from this history for us today is the imperative to *organize* the masses — not just mobilize them — to be effective. Relatedly, and equally important, we cannot focus on only one axis of oppression. The liberal arm of the women’s movement failed to recognize the power of poor women, and the particular needs of Jewish women were also not centered. The Nazis, or “National Socialists,” as they called themselves, gained prominence employing a rhetoric of wanting social programs (which remained popular), but only for those deemed “deserving,” to divide the populace. This tactic is not their invention, but has been used often to keep the masses under the control of the few, since dividing a popular movement is the primary path to its defeat. A unified movement that considers and includes everyone’s needs is both more resilient and more just, presenting us all with a future we believe in fighting for together.