

May 2018

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Recommended Citation

Marie Silva, Southern Oregon University (2018) "The Rise and Fall of the Weimar Woman," *The Compass*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 5 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/thecompass/vol1/iss5/5>

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The Rise and Fall of the Weimar Woman

By: Marie Silva, *Southern Oregon University*

Introduction

The women in Germany during the Weimar Republic had an interesting opportunity. Following the war, women were given the right to vote, hold elected office, leave the home in favor of work, seek higher education, and strive to find a life outside of societal gender norms. They fought for political reforms and pursued opportunities that had eluded them previously, but economic restrictions and gender bias soon frustrated their efforts. The following historical examination of women in Germany from the end of World War I through the rise of the Third Reich demonstrates the progress of women's political, social, and reproductive rights that were expanded during the Weimar Republic (1919-1933). Further, this analysis attempts to explain why a majority of women willingly surrendered progress by conforming to traditional cultural and gender expectations under the Third Reich.

Background

In 1871, the German Empire was founded following three Prussian Wars. Divided into two houses, the government consisted of "The *Reichstag* to represent the people, and the *Bundesrat*, to represent the 25 states."¹ The two sectors of parliamentary power were

designed to create a balanced government that represented all people. However, this governmental structure did not reflect the shift away from rural hamlets to urban areas. Lack of political voice for the populace led to the rise of alternative political parties, such as the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD)² which began as a grass roots type movement.³ Such political organizations were referred to as *Reichsfeinde*⁴ by Otto von Bismarck, the Reichskanzler.⁵

In 1914, Germany entered World War I, honoring their alliance with the Austria-Hungarian Empire. At this point in history, Germany was an industrial giant. United behind a common War effort, Germany felt a national unity that had previously been lacking.⁶ However, WWI was not a quick affair, and the Germans suffered greatly for their participation. Crippled with huge numbers of casualties, food and fuel shortages; Germans found themselves in a troubling situation. "Soldiers returning from the military fronts by the hundreds of thousands were left stranded, jobless, hungry, and bitter – grist for the mill of revolution."⁷ As a result, the cultural and societal expectations of women began to shift. However, this shift was not permanent. An examination of the changing expectations of women in Germany follows.

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica, "Germany."

² Translation: Social Democratic Party, abbreviated SPD.

³ Encyclopedia Britannica, "Germany."

⁴ Translation: Enemies of the empire.

⁵ Translation: Chancellor of Germany

⁶ Encyclopedia Britannica, "Germany."

⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica, "Germany."

World War One: A Window of Opportunity

Anton Kaes and his fellow editors of *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* wrote, "World War I and the advent of the republic significantly altered the role of women in German society."⁸ Traditionally, German women were restricted to the roles of wife and mother. During WWI, women entered the workforce on behalf of the war effort and to support the German economy while men were fighting on the front. Kaes wrote, "the war had placed many women in the workplace and opened the doors to higher education..."⁹ War brought the women of Germany opportunity that they hungered for, and a chance to break out of their socially and culturally prescribed roles as wives and mothers

In 1919, Marianne Weber wrote an open letter in *Frauenfragen und Frauendanken, Gesammelte Aufsätze* that brought forward an issue that was likely on the minds of all women in Germany - the return of the men from war. Her letter discussed the "special cultural mission of women" and what they must do to assist the men on reintegrating into productive society. She writes, "in order to master the devastating effects of this terrible war, still scarcely estimated in their magnitude, we are in need of unflagging moral energies and great faith."¹⁰ She saw the role of women as the anchor of the German culture. Women were a constant reminder of what German society used to be, and what it could be again. They were the core of the German household, and Weber hoped that their role as a cultural anchor would serve as a reminder to the returning men, and assist in reorienting them into German society. Further, she writes, "we can only hope that their inner

natures were protected by some kind of immunity to poisonous influences ... One can only hope that the millions of men who had to withstand the years of inconceivable hardships have not lost their desire for it."¹¹ According to Weber and those like her, German women were the keepers of the cultural richness of Germany, and Weber believed that it was their mission to remind men of that fact.

Post War Challenges

Economic Opportunity

Despite that, not all women wanted to be the cultural guardians envisioned by Marianne Weber. With new opportunities available, more women saw that marriage and children were not the only purpose of life. Women began to seek employment, take advantage of higher education, and delve into the political sphere. Women had been granted the right to vote and hold political office in 1919, after WWI ended. Claudia Koonz describes the events that transpired to enfranchise women as a complete surprise. When the SPD came to power in 1918, their previous two decades spent advocating women's suffrage was vindicated.¹² Given the opportunity to participate in politics, women not only voted in the first election of the Weimar Republic, but many ran for political office. In fact, during the first election of the new republic that women could participate in, 111 women were elected into positions in the Reichstag.¹³ Koonz writes, "Between 1919 and 1933, approximately eight percent of the national legislature was composed of women... This relatively large representation of women was one indication of the importance accorded to women's issues at that time."¹⁴

⁸ Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (1994): 195.

⁹ Kaes, 195.

¹⁰ Marianne Weber, "The Special Cultural Mission of Women" in Kaes, Anton, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (1994): 197.

¹¹ Weber, in Kaes, 197.

¹² Koonz, Claudia. "Conflicting Allegiances: Political Ideology and Women Legislators in Weimar Germany" *Signs*, Vol 1 no. 3 (1976): 665.

¹³ Kaes, 195.

¹⁴ Koonz, 664.

As a result of women's ability to vote, women visibly aligned themselves with political parties that embodied their beliefs and provided a political platform for women's issues. For example, many women flocked to the *Deutschnationale Volkspartei* (DNVP)¹⁵, which according to an article by Raffael Scheck, the "...DNVP wrote legislation on immorality in public life ('trash and dirt'), the abolition of regulated prostitution, and a variety of matters concerning social welfare, the family, schools, and the churches."¹⁶ Regardless of a shift in political power for women in Germany, the international balance of power served as a roadblock for further progress.

As a result of the "War Guilt Clause," Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was at a global disadvantage after World War I. Germany accepted responsibility for "causing all the loss and damage" imposed on the Allied powers as a consequence of the war.¹⁷ This clause required Germany to pay war reparations that were economically devastating. Beginning in 1920, Germany experienced a period of hyperinflation, which peaked in 1923. "When the economy collapsed on November 15, 1923, it took 4.2 trillion German marks to buy a single American dollar."¹⁸ As a result, frustrations abounded amongst women who were choosing to work and those needed to work to support their families. Women who lost a spouse in the war had trouble finding employment to support her family because men were wanted first for employment. Women were frustrated that they had willingly entered the workforce to support the fatherland during the war, but upon the war's end, were left with rejection and menial wages. Consequently, women accepted jobs for

a fraction of the wages that men would earn while still caring for children and performing all of the household duties. This left a feeling of discontent among working women in Germany. Written by an unknown author and published in *Die Kommunistin* in 1921, "*Zum internationalen Frauentag. An alle werktätigen Frauen!*"¹⁹ was a call-to-arms of sorts for the frustrated working women of the Republic. It states, "Your lives and deeds are dominated by exorbitant price increases with which small and medium incomes cannot keep pace. Exorbitant prices deplete your bread and season it with the bitterest of worries and scalding tears. ... you have the doors to the places of work and employment slammed in your faces. It is *the family* you should tend to, *which you don't have* or for which you would need bread. Think of the mass graves in which flourishing male life lies mouldering..."²⁰ Although this "call to arms" was published with the intention to enact change in the post-war period, no meaningful movements emerged to restore respect for women in the workplace.

Societal Expectations

However, women in the post-war period viewed themselves as a new type of woman. Due to the workload of home and workplace responsibilities thrust upon the Weimar Woman, this generation desired to "break free" from traditional gender norms. For example, Elsa Hermann, in her piece entitled *The New Woman*, wrote, "to all appearances, the distinction between women in our day and those of previous times is to be sought only in formal terms because the modern woman refuses to lead the life of a lady and a

¹⁵ Translation: German Nationalist People's Party (DNVP)

¹⁶ Scheck, Raffael. "Women on the Weimar Right: The Role of Female Politicians in the Deutschnationale Volkspartei (DNVP)" *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol 36 no. 4 (2001): 547.

¹⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica, "Germany."

¹⁸ Encyclopedia Britannica, "Germany."

¹⁹ Translation: Manifesto for International Women's Day.

²⁰ "Manifesto for International Women's Day" in Kaes, Anton, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (1994): 198.

housewife, preferring to depart from the ordained path and go her own way.”²¹ By redefining concepts of gender roles, Hermann sought to establish that women are not inferior to the men. “The people of yesterday are strongly inclined to characterize the modern woman as unfeminine because she is no longer wrapped up in kitchen work and the chores that have to be done around the house.”²² Women of the Weimar Republic were experiencing an awakening. These women longed to abandon their traditional roles and step alongside men as equals. “Despite the fact that every war from time immemorial had entailed the liberation of an intellectually, spiritually, or physically fettered social group, the war and postwar period of our recent past had brought women nothing extraordinary in the slightest but only awakened them from their lethargy and laid upon them the responsibility for their own fate.”²³ Weimar women sought more from life than what was proscribed by the contemporary expectations of society. Barbara Kosta argues that, to some, the modern woman of Weimar was viewed as an insult to previous conceptions of Germanic motherhood, and womanhood in general. The Weimar woman, in her quest to become her own individual and an equal to the men of the Weimar Republic, found her reality to be full of frustration.

Further, consensus was not found among women living in Germany. For example, not all women agreed that being valued by society as equal to men was a worthwhile pursuit. Some married women who were working found that they were still expected to do household chores on top of their work

duties. As such, this group of women did not have the ability or incentive to fight for equality. Artist Otto Dix depicted images of mothers in urban industrial settings, personifying the working-class mother. In Michelle Vangen’s article *Left and Right: Politics and Images of Motherhood in Weimar Germany*, she states that Otto Dix’s works “appear as actual portrayals of the experience of being a destitute mother in one of Weimar Germany’s many big cities.”²⁴ Textile workers described their experiences as working women and mothers in *Mein Arbeitstag, Mein Wochenende*.²⁵ These articles tell tales of women rising before the sun, getting everyone in the household ready for the day, heading off to jobs, darning socks and other small mending tasks on their 30-minute lunch breaks, and after work, the life of woman is a flurry of cooking, cleaning, and preparing for the next day.²⁶ Women were beginning to sour on their so-called freedoms and equalities. As a result of being overextended in the home and in the workplace, women could not devote time to the political process. Due to the high expectations of society, Weimar Women were in no position to redefine their role in society or politics. Further, the social order at the time presented its own set of challenges.

For example, Hilde Walter explains in *Twilight for Women?* that “a mass psychosis cannot be exercised by such reasonable, sober arguments, nor can they now stamp out the nearly mythical idea of the economic detriment caused by working women.”²⁷ Walter’s argument is simple at its core. Without working women, there would be a detrimental hit to the

²¹ Elsa Hermann, “This is the New Woman” in Kaes, Anton, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (1994): 206

²² Hermann, 207.

²³ Hermann, 207.

²⁴ Vangen, Michelle. “Left and Right: Politics and Images of Motherhood in Weimar Germany” *Woman’s Art Journal*, Vol 30 no. 2 (2009): 27.

²⁵ Translation: My Workday, My Weekend.

²⁶ Textile Workers, “My Workday, My Weekend” in Kaes, Anton, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (1994): 209.

²⁷ Hilde Walter, “Twilight for Women?” in Kaes, Anton, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (1994): 211.

economic stability of Germany, but the patriarchy still wanted women to return to their traditional roles as wives and mothers. Traditionalists believed that women were best suited to be wives and mothers, rather than scholars or low-wage workers, regardless of the situation of the individual. However, this meant “that two million women of marriageable age would be left altogether unprovided for were they to be without work.”²⁸ Perhaps the reluctance of men to welcome women into the workplace stems from the high rate of unemployment among men returning from the war. After the Treaty of Versailles was signed, the economic situation in Germany was a tenuous song and dance, with employers constantly seeking ways to increase profits to offset the outrageous inflation that Germany was experiencing. Hiring women at a fraction of the salary that men would command was a popular way for employers to achieve this end.

Reproductive Rights in the Weimar Republic

Motherhood became another area of contention for women the Weimar Republic. Wehring pointed out how some women no longer believed that motherhood was a worthy inclination. “Ask any one of those short-skirted, silk-stockinged females what she makes of the thought of carrying and bearing a child. She turns away from the possibility with an amused shudder.”²⁹ With sexual liberation and promiscuity sweeping through Germany, the constant worry of becoming pregnant was a very real concern for most women. Men believed that birth control was their business. Additionally, the German government regulated reproduction with

legislation such as Paragraph 218 of Basic Law, enacted on January 1, 1872³⁰, which regulated abortion. According to Paragraph 218, once the egg is fertilized, nothing can be done to prevent that fertilized egg from being born. Manfred Georg wrote, “it is not a matter of whether and how the perpetrator of this act should be punished, but how - and here only the numerically largest category (number two, abortion from need) is relevant - the perpetrator is to be protected from the consequences of the act; the issue of abortion is an issue of protecting birth, a population policy that is willing to take its cue directly from the needs of the fetus.”³¹ Manfred Georg argued that penalizing a mother for aborting a fetus was “pointless”. However, abortion carried a criminal penalty for all involved in the procedure under the rule of law established by Paragraph 218. For the first time in Germany, the post war period introduced the desire for reproductive rights. Activists, such as Georg, sought to reduce this penalty, which would grant women autonomy over their bodies. However, the rise of the Third Reich dampened the efforts of progress that emerged after World War I ended.

Understandably, women were weary after a decade of fighting for equal rights, equal pay, and control over their bodies. A common disincentive to for action seemed to ripple through society. In an economically crippled country, women were losing the battle for expanded rights. Alice Rühle-Gerstel understood the awkward and tenuous position of the “new woman” of the Weimar Republic. She wrote, “Her old womanly fate – motherhood, love, family – trailed behind her into the spheres of the new womanliness, which immediately presented itself as a new objectivity. Therefore, she found herself not

²⁸ Walter, 211.

²⁹ Wehring, 722.

³⁰ Panikos Panayi, *Weimar and Nazi Germany: Continuities and Discontinuities*. Routledge, (2014): 208.

³¹ Manfred Georg, “The Right to Abortion” in Kaes, Anton, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (1994): 201.

liberated, as she had naively assumed, but now doubly bound.”³² The women of Weimar felt the strain of these conflicts, coupled with the strain of a depressed and virtually destroyed economy. Years of struggle had left them feeling defeated and looking toward the past with nostalgia. The Weimar Republic Sourcebook points out, “many women in fact voted for conservative, even radical, right-wing parties because these promised a restoration of order through traditional roles.”³³ The women were looking for any change that would bring them back to their past, because they most likely believed that things could not get any worse. Although women in post-War Germany were able to redefine their social identity, nostalgia for better times undermined the progress of expanded women’s rights.

Still in the depths of the Great Depression (1929-1932), Germany was experiencing political instability. With soaring unemployment rates and a fractured economy, the populace was fed up with the political inactivity from the Weimar government, and was looking for a change. That change would come with the election of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany in 1933. He took office with promises to change Germany for the better by restoring the glory and prestige of the fatherland. Given the poor economic and political past that the Germans had experienced under Otto von Bismarck and the Weimar Republic, the German people were anxious to see what Hitler and his government could do for Germany.

Women and Motherhood in the Third Reich

Motherhood

The Third Reich made women and mothers a priority in their political rhetoric. According to Ludolf Hasse, an Office of Women’s Affairs was established and tasked with the “education of the female sex toward maternity and motherhood... promoting the increase in family size and reproduction of the Volk, psychological and material protection of the family...”³⁴ amongst other educational benefits. Stepping away from the efforts of the Weimar Republic to get women to choose their own path in life, the Third Reich was actively encouraging women to return to their homes and tend to their families with the promise that the government would make sure that they did not have to suffer as they had previously. Given the prior decade, this was a compelling plan to the women.

The *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP)³⁵ believed, as Marianne Weber did, that women were the keepers of the culture of Germany and that it was their sacred duty to transmit that culture to future generations. In a speech to German women, Walter Gross appealed to the women regarding innate feelings to procreate. “We speak of them only because for a few decades a crazy ear ignored, blasphemed, and mocked these greatest, most beautiful, and purest dreams of life...When we think back on our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, there were many children in the house.”³⁶ He goes on to say that the Germans had the potential to be a dying people. The Third Reich wanted women to resume the role of motherhood and to help create the next generation of German citizens.

³² Alice Rühle-Gerstel, “Back to the Good Old Days?” in Kaes, Anton, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (1994): 218.

³³ Kaes, 196

³⁴ Ludolf Haase, “We Need a Reich Office of Racial Affairs” in Rabinback, Anson, Sander L. Gilman, trans, Lilian M. Friedberg. *The Third Reich Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2013): 153-157.

³⁵ Translation: National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP), also referred to as the Nazi Party.

³⁶ Walter Gross, “National Socialist Racial Party: A Speech to German Women” in Rabinback, Anson, Sander L. Gilman, trans. Lilian M. Friedberg. *The Third Reich Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press (2013): 157.

The Third Reich heavily promoted the role of motherhood. Gertrude Altmann-Gädke wrote about the importance of reinforcing the maternal instinct in young women. “You are entitled to be bursting with pride when you have blessed as many children as possible with life and a good upbringing!”³⁷ Yet, it should be noted that while they were encouraging women to have as many children as possible, they preferred children that fulfilled the Aryan ideal - those free from birth defects and what the Third Reich considered mental or social defects. Authors of one of the four mandated biology books used for higher education in the Third Reich, Otto Steche, Erich Stengel, and Maxim Wagner brought the concept of eugenics and perceived genetic superiority to the forefront in their policies regarding the accolades bestowed on families who procreate. “A careful selection process conducted by the Department of Health and the Racial Political Office of the NSDAP has seen to it that only those parents whose flock of children is truly a treasure to our Volk receive the Book of Honors. Large families that are genetically inferior or asocial are entirely ineligible.”³⁸ The Germans wanted to encourage the propagation of their people, but only if they were genetically superior.

According to Heinrich Himmler, the NSDAP believed that abortion should be illegal because it was a “major violation of the ideological tenets of the National Socialist worldview...”³⁹ Stepping away from the

arguments over Paragraph 218, the NSDAP was clear that the birth of more German children was desired from all able women. Women no longer had the rights to birth control, and punishment for abortions became much stricter. Women were encouraged to devote of their time and energy into producing the next generation of German citizens and were rewarded for their efforts. Mothers with large broods of children were recognized and rewarded by the Reich for their contributions.

Initiatives.

In addition to the benefits extended to women who were of child-bearing age, the Third Reich sought to expand their support by educating young girls in Germany. The education of women began when girls were young through organizations such as the Bundes Deutscher Mädel (BDM)⁴⁰ and as their own branch of the Hitler-Jugend.⁴¹ Illustrated by a propaganda piece by Oberbannführer Stephan, through these social programs, the Third Reich was able to indoctrinate young minds with the pro-family propaganda.⁴² Programs such as these promoted the concept of “*Glaube und Schönheit*”⁴³ amongst young women and girls. Günter Kaufmann’s propaganda piece was directed toward young women specifically. He wrote “taking pleasure in human beauty must emanate from feminine vanity and must be accompanied by a rigorous culture of physical hygiene and a certain elegance.”⁴⁴

³⁷ Gertrud Altmann-Gädke, “The Maternal Instinct Must be Reinforced” in Rabinback, Anson, Sander L. Gilman, trans. Lilian M. Friedberg. *The Third Reich Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2013): 325.

³⁸ Otto Steche, Erich Stengel, and Maxim Wagner, “Womb Wars” in Rabinback, Anson, Sander L. Gilman, trans. Lilian M. Friedberg. *The Third Reich Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2013): 334.

³⁹ Heinrich Himmler, “On Homosexuality and Abortion” in Rabinback, Anson, Sander L. Gilman, trans. Lilian M. Friedberg. *The Third Reich Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2013): 376

⁴⁰ Translation: League of German Girls (BDM)

⁴¹ Translation: Hitler Youth

⁴² Oberbannführer Stephan, “The League of German Girls Organization in the Hitler Youth” in Rabinback, Anson, Sander L. Gilman, trans. Lilian M. Friedberg. *The Third Reich Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2013): 259-261.

⁴³ Translation: Faith and Beauty.

⁴⁴ Günter Kaufmann, “Faith and Beauty” in Rabinback, Anson, Sander L. Gilman, trans. Lilian M. Friedberg. *The Third Reich Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2013): 263.

They encouraged the athleticism and healthfulness of their members and encouraged the conformity of the young girls and women to fit the German ideal.

Carola Struve laid out the list of women's freedoms under the Third Reich. The propaganda put forth by the Third Reich made it appear that they believed that women should be equal to men in all things; a quest that women had undertaken in 1918. But, further examination of documents such as the one by Carola Struve highlight the fact that they are enumerating only the laws of nature and the women's relation to them. Two interesting points from that document go hand in hand: "That nature had placed the task of solving all ethical quandaries in the hands of women... That nature will not allow for any disobedience in the form of distancing oneself from her laws."⁴⁵ Adolf Hitler would go a step further when he stated, "The word *women's emancipation* is merely an invention of the Jewish intellect, and its meaning is informed by the same spirit. The German woman never has any need for emancipation during those times when German's are truly leading the 'good life'."⁴⁶ The women of the Third Reich seemed to be unaware, or just did not care, that their legal rights were being replaced with shallow promises and platitudes.

Conclusion

The women of Germany were doomed from the start on their quest for equal rights. Following World War I, the seeds for revolutionary changes were not properly sewn. The emaciated economic state of Germany after the war left little time to equal the playing field for women and men. Although women had the power to use voting rights and access to political office to affect change, the social realities of the post-war period were an obstacle. For example, women were over-extended earning a living wage, maintaining the household, and raising children and could not take full advantage of their political rights. Women attempted to be different from previous generations, but in the end a conscious choice was made to relent and follow societal expectations. Hungry, disenfranchised, hurt, and neglected, the German woman felt that her progress had stalled and she became too tired to keep fighting.

⁴⁵ Carola Struve, "Women's Freedom and Freedom of the Volk on Foundations of Camaraderie" in Rabinback, Anson, Sander L. Gilman, trans. Lilian M. Friedberg. *The Third Reich Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2013): 311.

⁴⁶ Adolf Hitler, "Speech to the Meeting of the National Socialist Women's Organization" in Rabinback, Anson, Sander L. Gilman, trans. Lilian M. Friedberg. *The Third Reich Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2013): 311.

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