

The feminine side of eugenics

Hitler's Furies: German women in the Nazi killing fields, 4th edition

Wendy Lower

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, MA, 2013

Jerry Bergman

A rarely known aspect of the Holocaust was the important role women played in the movement, even in the racial-eugenic killings. Part of the reason why little was known until recently was because hundreds of women were called to testify against the men as witnesses and “many were very forthcoming, since prosecutors were more interested in the heinous crimes of their male colleagues” (p. 2).

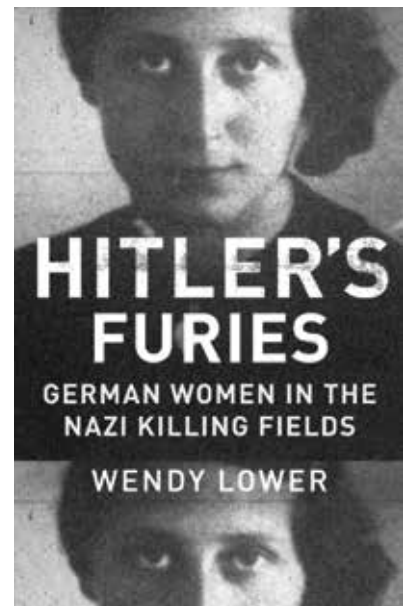
Another factor is women in general were widely viewed as incapable of the level of violence existing among men in general. Or if female involvement is mentioned at all, it would be some ostensibly exceptionally brutal death camp guards such Irma Grese, Maria Mandl, or Jenny-Wanda Barkmann, hanged for their crimes after the war. But Professor Lower also documents the involvement of many ‘ordinary women’ in Germany—mothers, teachers, and nurses—all careers we associate with compassionate personalities, not killers (p. 4). She writes:

“The role of German women in Hitler’s war can no longer be understood as their mobilization and victimization on the home front. Instead, Hitler’s Germany produced another kind of female character at war, an expression of female activism and patriotism of the most violent and perverse kind (p. 119).”

Wendy Lower, John K. Roth Professor of History and George R. Roberts Fellow at Claremont McKenna College, is a consultant for the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and a researcher in Eastern Europe where the eugenic race genocide occurred. Her in-depth research sheds much-needed light on one aspect of WWII that has been ignored for decades. One major review, although it noted a few writing shortcomings, was very supportive of her strong conclusions.¹ The ironic fact is, the “consensus in Holocaust and genocide studies”, the author writes, is that the “systems that make mass murder possible would not function without the broad participation of society, and yet nearly all histories of the Holocaust leave out half of those who populated that society, as if women’s history happens somewhere else” (pp. 13–14).

One method to help determine the motivations of the women who were involved in the Holocaust is from the letters they wrote home. A good example is one woman who discussed the non-Aryan issue and Nazi goals, namely the problem of the “admixture of blood between the controlling strata, the German element and the foreign people ... [which] would be a cardinal breach of our understanding of the need to preserve our Nordic racial inheritance and our future” (pp. 5–6). Her study carefully documents the overriding concern of the Nazis for eugenics, even calling it a race war involving the Aryans against inferior races, and the problem of racial degeneration caused by sex with non-Aryans (pp. 23–24).

To achieve this racial goal, women must “raise ordinary Germans’



racial consciousness” because it was especially the females that had to understand what the Nazi’s claimed was the problem of lecherous Jews having sexual designs on young German women (pp. 26–27). The education of girls included ‘racial hygiene’ (*Rassenhygiene*) instructed by genealogical charts to help the students become aware of their racial bloodline and who were Aryans and who were not (p. 27). This indoctrination primed some of them to express violence later on when they officially became part of the Nazi movement.

Based on two decades of research and interviews, Lower documented the central role of women in Nazi Germany, focusing on the women who participated in the Nazi extermination of the Jews. She concluded that German women had a major role in perpetrating the Holocaust based on the same reasons the men had. These women, whom the author calls Hitler’s Furies, a reference to the mythological ‘goddesses of vengeance’, actively took part in the murders of Jews and looting Jewish property. Himmler, Goebbels, Göring, and Speer usually get centre billing, but evidence is

presented that the women behind the men played a critical role.

Nurses

The major profession of women involved in the Nazi genocide was nursing. Nurses were specially counselled about the importance of ‘racial hygiene’. A major role they played was to participate in the selection of the mentally and physically disabled and to escort them to their death by lethal injection, and later in gas chambers. They also worked in infirmaries and concentration camps, not only with prisoners, but also with traumatized Nazi soldiers. In short, they “were the primary witnesses of the Holocaust” (p. 43).

Many young girls were receptive to the Nazi nursing profession due to the racial biology indoctrination they received in school. As a result, shortly after Germany conquered Poland, 15,000 were recruited. To be fully accredited, they had to prove their Aryan racial status. Not unexpectedly, of “all the female professions, nursing contained the highest concentration of documented crimes”, mostly in the euthanasia program and medical experiments done in the concentration camps (p. 50). Of note, Lower claims, is that involvement in the euthanasia program was “absolutely voluntary” (p. 51).

The nurses were influenced by the fact that “a core of male and female medical professionals increasingly turned to ‘racial science’ to deal with problems that concerned women” (p. 18). Lower related the career of one very well-educated, bright woman named Pauline Kneissler, who was involved in the Aktion T4 eugenics program that “murdered 9,839 people” as part of the Nazi genocide program to purify Germans racially. She spent only a year in prison for her crimes.

Nurses as murderers

Nurses played a critical role in the Holocaust and the attempt to implement eugenics. Lower writes that the “first Nazi mass murderess was not the concentration camp guard but the nurses. Of all female professions she was the deadliest” (p. 120). The Nazi killings began in the hospitals of the 3rd Reich, then the hospitals of the countries the Nazis conquered. The first killing methods were not the gun or the gas chambers, but the sleeping pill, then the hypodermic needle, and last, starvation. The first victims were children, then old people, then the rest including ‘inferior races’ (p. 120). This was done in the name of eugenics spawned by leaders such as the American, Harvard-educated Charles Davenport. His writings include the book *Eugenics: The science of human improvement by better breeding*. The Nazis thought they were doing just that, and this is why they named their eugenic programs “racial hygiene” (pp. 120–121).

The eugenic movement in America and Nazi Germany believed that inherited ‘genetic’ defects were partly racial, and they deemed some races were “more advanced than others, all of them competing for survival” (p. 121). The Nazis and many others viewed racism was something to be proud of. Germans believed their ideals could be achieved only by removing humanity’s dross, including its inferior races. Nazi men and women must understand and apply ‘the science of inequality’ to achieve their golden greater Germany.

The final solution to the degeneration of the race problem was to destroy the contaminant, namely inferior races. The Nazis believed we are not descendants of one parent, as Judaism and what the Nazis called its bastard child, Christianity, teach, but rather that we evolved, and that some races are more evolved than others. With these ideas firmly implanted

in the minds of the nurses and other women, they could do their part to make Germany a more perfect society. It required an army of thousands of nurses, midwives, doctors, and other medical personnel to get the job done.

In the end, close to 400 medical institutions served as centres of racial screening and selection, cruel experimentation, sterilization, starvation, and poisoning all in working towards achieving this eugenic goal (p. 121). After wiping out most mental patients in German hospitals, the eugenic experts began to do the same in Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and other hospitals (pp. 121–122).

In the end, well over 200,000 people were murdered, many for what we would regard as minor or treatable maladies. Next came ‘mercy’ deaths of mentally or physically disabled soldiers on the Eastern front to put them ‘out of their misery’. As expected, this adversely affected troop morale, thus was not widely made known and denied in public reports. Some nurses testified that they gave lethal injections to brain-damaged, blinded or mutilated German servicemen (p. 123). It was the job of the educated teachers to help instill these Darwinian racist eugenic goals in the minds of every student, especially health students.

Women as teachers

Teachers often “became cooperative agents of the Nazi Party” (p. 56). The preparation of women for this important role in Nazi Germany “required indoctrination and reinforcement pursued relentlessly in the Reich’s schools. ... a proper education should include burning ‘the racial sense and racial feeling into the instinct and the intellect, the heart and brain of the youth’” (p. 39). For example, students learned in mathematics class the welfare cost to maintain ‘useless eaters’, a

theme interwoven in all subjects to help indoctrinate the students into the superior race belief (p. 39).

The teaching profession stressed instruction in making judgments of who was human and who was ‘subhuman’ (p. 40). Hundreds of teachers were sent to occupied Poland to teach the children that were deemed to be ‘racially valuable’, as determined by various tests like those developed by Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton (p. 43). Many of these children were orphans because their parents had been shot and, even though traumatized, the teacher’s job was to teach them “proper behavior and the superiority of the German race” (pp. 42–43).

Professor Lower details some of the horribly violent female concentration camp guards and brutality that rivaled anything perpetrated by their male counterparts. The long-held picture of German women taking care of the home front during the war as loyal wives and cheerleaders for the Führer, pales in comparison to Lower’s incisive case for the massive complicity, and worse, of the 500,000 young German women who became part of the Nazi war machine. Many were placed, for their first exposure, directly in the killing fields of the expanding Reich in the East.

This land was needed to have room for what the Nazis planned would be the rapidly growing population of Aryan children as a result of women being encouraged to reproduce with or without a husband. Women who had four or more children were given a decoration conferred from 1939 until 1945 in three classes: bronze, silver, and gold to mothers who exhibited exemplary motherhood, and who conceived and raised at least four or more children.

The enormous bureaucracy required for the Final Solution

I have read close to 50 books on the Nazi movement, but this one covered

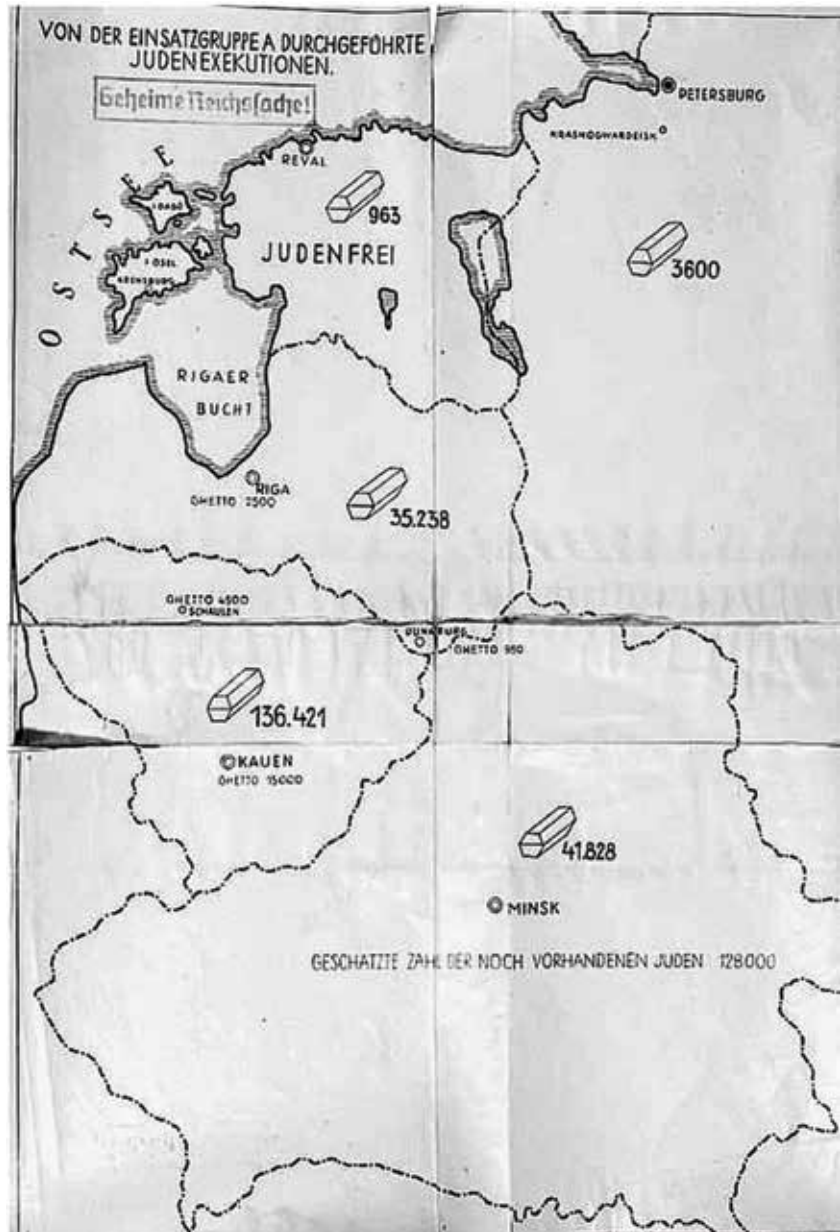


Figure 1. Coffin-decorated tally of Einsatzgruppen killing of *Untermenschen* (subhumans)

an area rarely reviewed in these books: the enormous bureaucracy required by the Nazis to administrate the vast conquered territories in the East and determine the *Untermenschen* (subhumans) to either exploit or murder them. This was covered by Professor Lower in detail because a significant part of the staff were women. Women were secretaries, clerks, and administrators of specific programs.

These women opened the mail and read the letters and other correspondence to determine the appropriate action, either file it away or reroute it to other persons. Photographs were often included of the atrocities committed by the *Einsatzgruppen* (figure 1), the paramilitary death squads of Nazi Germany responsible for mass killings, primarily by shooting, during World War II. The correspondence also

described the number murdered, where, when, and how it was carried out for record keeping. These women would write home to their parents, friends, and relatives, often describing the atrocities in great detail, good evidence that the killings were widely known by the German people and well-documented. Thus, none of the women “could claim ignorance of the human impact of her work” that involved the mass murders (p. 99).

Women became involved in the Nazi war machine for several reasons, including to have a part in building the new Germany, to experience new adventures, to get away from dead-end jobs at home, or to break up boredom. Because a large portion of young men were in the military, finding husbands was not realistic during the war. Those who had boyfriends in the military did not want to waste their time waiting for them to be discharged. In the end, over 20 million German soldiers were killed, leaving many thousands of widows and single women behind. Another reason so many women became part of the Nazi war machine was they “got swept up in the moment and movement” (p. 98).

Much of the violence against *Untermenschen* was well-documented, some in great detail by Lower. For example, a mother who begged for her life so she could take care of her baby (or in some cases her mother). Those so claiming were allowed to bring their baby (or mother) to prove their claim, and both were subsequently shot. Conversely, some of the men experienced great difficulty with being part of the senseless human carnage, and it fell to the female nurses to attempt in some way to help comfort them. The women in this case often appealed to their masculinity and their role in helping to achieve a greater Germany.

The numbers of eugenic murders are numbing. In the first wave of massacres in the Soviet Union alone, over 500,000 were murdered, then another 135,567

in the small neighbouring countries, such as Estonia (p. 107). Lower’s well-documented work also helps one to realize the enormous amount of money, men, women, and resources required in the goal of eliminating the *Untermenschen*. Use of these enormous resources almost appeared to be more important than winning the war, and likely was one major reason why Germany lost the war.

An example of the cruelty by some women is 22-year-old Johanna Altvater. She worked in the Ukraine for the regional commissar, SS officer Wilhelm Westerheide. She often accompanied her boss on shooting parties on weekends to hunt and kill Jews. On September 16, 1942, she entered the Jewish ghetto and saw two children, a 6-year-old and a toddler. She gestured to them as if she was going to give them candy (p. 126). When they came, she lifted the 6-year-old in her arms and held her so tight the child began to scream. Ms Altvater then grabbed the child by the legs and slammed its head against the ghetto wall like one would bang dust out of a rug.

She then threw the now lifeless child at the feet of her father, who testified that he had never seen such inhumane behaviour from a woman. The father added there were no other German officials present. Altvater did this act on her own to help natural selection with removal of the *Untermenschen* to contribute her part to produce a superior race. After the war she finally—almost 40 years later, in 1979—had her day in court with her former superior, Westerheid. They were ultimately acquitted in a lower court and again in a higher court in December 1982. After 40 years it is hard to prove even solid cases. Most witnesses were dead or could not remember certain details. The women, as was true of the men, usually claimed they were only obeying orders. So Altvater, like too many of the other women discussed in the book, as Lower concludes, “got away with murder”.

Conclusion

The major takeaway is that women’s involvement in the Nazi killing machine was because they were fully convinced that this work was “expected of a virtuous woman, a loyal German patriot, a racially superior Aryan” (p. 79). It was also a result of the indoctrination in the schools, colleges, by the mass media, the Nazi-sponsored boys’ and girls’ organizations such as the Hitler Youth movement, radio broadcasts, the movies, and other propaganda. The same is true of Darwinism today. It is accepted by much of the Western population for many of the same reasons, as well as the censorship of opposing views.^{2,3,4}

The Nazis rejected the view that all humans are brothers and sisters, all descended from Adam and Eve, and instead accepted the opposite view, namely that some races were not only inferior, but subhumans called the *Untermenschen*. This was the term the Nazis used to describe non-Aryan “inferior people”, often referred to as “the masses from the East” that included Jews, Roma, and Slavs, mainly ethnic Poles, Serbs, and Russians. The result of rejecting Adam and Eve as our first parents has proved devastating.

References

1. Nazism’s Feminine Side, Brutal and Murderous, nytimes.com/2013/10/09/books/hitlers-furies-by-wendy-lower-examines-german-women.html, 8 October 2013.
2. Bergman, J., *Slaughter of the Dissidents: The shocking truth about killing the careers of Darwin doubters*, Leafcutter Press, Southworth, WA, 2012.
3. Bergman, J., *Silencing the Darwin Skeptics*, Leafcutter Press, Southworth, WA, 2016.
4. Bergman, J., *Censoring the Darwin Skeptics: How belief in evolution is enforced by eliminating dissidents*, Leafcutter Press, Southworth, WA, 2018.