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Fashionable Fascists: How Female Nazis Used Fashion for Empowerment During the Holocaust

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Abstract

This research presents a contemporary analysis of the experience of female perpetrators during the Holocaust. Using testimonies, photographs, and previous research done on the subject, this project analyses how female perpetrators during the Holocaust used fashion to prove themselves to their male counterparts and to feel powerful enough to follow the Nazi agenda, thus creating a sense of distorted feminism. This newfound sense of feminism among the female perpetrators was done through using brutal force and the aesthetics of their uniforms to gain the attention and recognition they craved from their male counterparts. The recognition and validation from the male Nazis played a critical role in the actions of the female Nazis, as this affirmation was a key motivator for said actions. Though the social pressures of their male counterparts and of other women and uniforms were key in enabling these actions, the foundational ideals of fascism had an overarching impact. These various factors are what contributed to the motivation of the female perpetrators of the Holocaust.

Keywords: The Holocaust, World War II, Women's Studies, Female Perpetrators, Nazi Fashion

One of the first things that you notice about someone is the way that they are dressed. When one researches Erna Petri, a Nazi war criminal, they may have a distinct picture in their mind about what she would look like; what stands out the most is what she would not look like -- a typical woman. For someone to have killed children, they must look like a mean and cold person, right? After seeing a picture of Petri, one would be shocked that she was as “normal” as she was. She appeared to be a happy woman, wearing everyday clothes. Without knowing context, one would have no idea that she did what she did. It could be confusing that someone who committed heinous acts could look so typical. At this moment, it becomes intriguing how clothing and “looks” played a role in people's interpretations of perpetrators, and more importantly, the perpetrators interpretations of themselves.

Using fashion to alter someone’s perspective on another person or to alter someone’s perspective on themselves is not a new or revolutionary concept. We do this in our day-to-day lives. People often go the extra mile to change their appearance to present themselves in the best way possible. Here, they are focusing on changing your appearance to make yourself feel better or to make yourself look better to someone else. The same thing is observable in the Schutzstaffel (SS) during World War II. This was not a female exclusive experience, male officials and Nazi affiliates alike focused on aesthetics and uniform presentation. Most scholars today could likely identify a Nazi uniform based on distinguishable features; the wide at the thigh pants, leather boots, and even hats.

Beauty standards vary widely between cultures and overtime. In a more ominous tone, it is also common to see women trying to blend in with a male populous for various reasons, like power, respect, and authority. Within the context of the Cambodian genocide, it was noted

how the women altered their appearances to “blend in” with men. Anthropologist Alexander Hinton wrote:

Another interesting aspect of DK gender ideology, partly inspired by Maoist China, was its erasure of many outward differences between men and women. Women cut their hair short, dressed in the same black garb as men, worked like men, avoided wearing markers of gender like jewelry and perfume, and used the same revolutionary idioms as men. [...] The leveling of status and gender difference between men and women also reflects the DK regime’s high-modernist orientation, as it sought to create and manipulate a homogenous population of revolutionaries.¹

These same principles applied to women who partook in the Nazi agenda. The female perpetrators during the Holocaust used fashion to prove themselves to their male counterparts to gain empowerment and to feel powerful enough comply with the Nazi agenda, creating a sense of deformed feminism.

Historiography

Jill Stephenson’s book, *The Nazi Organization of Women* and Irene Guenther’s *Nazi Chic? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich* both discuss the various subsections of the Nazi Party that pertained exclusively to women.^{2,3} She described how women formed their own political sections within the Nazi Party in order to create a space where they could accomplish what the men had told them they couldn’t do.⁴ Similarly, in Stephenson’s other work, *Women*

¹ Alexander Hinton, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadows of Genocide*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 156.

² Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich*, (New York: Berg).

³ Jill Stephenson, *The Nazi Organization of Women*, (Totowa: Barnes & Noble Books).

⁴ Ibid.

in Nazi Germany, she describes the overall experience of being a woman in Nazi Germany.⁵ In using primary testimonies, Stephenson analyzes the behavior of the female perpetrators within the camps in correlation to how life was outside of the camps.⁶ In her monograph, Stephenson wrote in regards to the shift of job availability, “The growth of large-scale industry enabled women, like men, to find regular paid work outside the home, with physical strength no longer vital in many mechanized occupations.”⁷ This analysis leads into the topic of empowerment and a distorted sense of empowerment amongst female perpetrators.

Similarly, *Nazi Women*, by Cate Haste, and *Hitler’s Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, by Wendy Lower talks about how the Nazi Party persuaded women to join and what role Hitler played in that movement.^{8,9} Haste, like Stephenson, discusses a wide variety of topics pertaining to women during this era. Haste wrote, “The image [Hitler] shaped as leader was of a man who sacrificed his personal life for Germany, a ‘saviour’ unhindered by domestic ties, and an ascetic unsullied by sex. Being ‘married to Germany’ meant that all women could idolize him.”¹⁰ In this assessment, it was asserted that propaganda played a role in the motivation of the perpetrators but also of Hitler. Himself being an icon of fascism further suggested that the fundamentals of nationalism and fascism played a role in what molded perpetrators.

⁵ Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*, (New York: Longman).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸ Wendy Lower, *Hitler’s Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Co.).

⁹ Cate Haste, *Nazi Women*, (London: Channel 4 Books).

¹⁰ Ibid., 8-9.

In her book entitled *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: The Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942-1944*, Elissa Mailänder discusses the female experience in the SS in great detail. In her monograph, while touching on what other researchers have as well, Mailänder explains in greater detail the significance of female uniforms.¹¹ In doing this, Mailänder provides an incredible insight into the day-to-day lives of the females living and working within concentration camps. She provided a thorough chart of the chain of command, along with testimony from some of the women about how they felt about other female guards.^{12,13} Through this monograph, along with almost every other mentioned, primary photographs of the women can be pulled.

Proving Worthiness to Male Perpetrators

First and foremost, the female perpetrators were obviously trying to prove themselves to their male counterparts. This is evident by the fact that women's behaviors were different in accordance with who they were around. For instance, Holocaust survivor Hilde Zimmermann reported, "Within the group of SS women, there were also those who beat the prisoners like crazy, especially when a man was watching. I still remember it quite clearly: the way they would fawn over the SS man, and then, when the labor detail headed out, go after prisoners, berating and beating them, showing how brutal they could be, in order to please him [...] they wanted to show what kind of a 'fellow' they were, so to speak."¹⁴ Another survivor, Charlotte Müller stated

¹¹ Elissa Mailänder, *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: The Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942-1944*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press).

¹² *Ibid.*, 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 145-6.

¹⁴ Hilde Zimmermann "Ich geb Dir einen Mantel, dass Du ihn noch in Freiheit tragen kannst." *Widerstehen im KZ. Österreichische Frauen erzählen*, ed. Karin Bergr, Elisabeth Holzinger, Lotte Podgornik, and Lisabeth Trallori (Vienna, 1987), 19. Cited within Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press).

that, “The most brutal *Aufseherinnen* maintained a region of terror. Boundless egotism, together with other deplorable personal qualities such as vindictiveness and violence, were the trademarks of the female guards, who did whatever they could to match the sadism of the SS men.”¹⁵ With these testimonies in place, it is clear that many of the female SS members wanted to be at the same level of authority as the men. Having a gendered way of living and thinking ultimately inspired the women to act brutal and merciless.

In another similar testimony, another survivor named Margarete Buber-Neumann stated that, “During their leisure hours, the new *Aufseherinnen* enjoyed socializing with the SS men from the guard troops. They soon noticed that the brutal ones enjoyed particular success with the men and bragged to them about their acts of heroism.”¹⁶ In this particular account, it is evident that not only did these women act brutally to prove themselves to men but to also gain their attention. This adds a dimension of women going out of their way to gain male attention. With this information, it would be logical to assume that these women were in competition with each other to gain this affirmation of role fulfillment. One female SS guard, Erna Pfannsteil, attested to a sort of social hierarchy within the women, outside of political standings within the Nazi Party. She stated, “Braunsteiner was very aware of the fact that she was deputy. In general, Braunsteiner was a rather unapproachable sort. Well, she always seemed to feel like she was a bit better than me.”¹⁷ With these social interactions that seem to

¹⁵ Charlotte Müller, *Die Klempnerkolonne in Ravensbrück. Erinnerungen des Häftlings Nr. 10787* (Berlin, 1990), 67. Cited within Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press).

¹⁶ Margarete Buber-Neumann, *Als Gefangene bei Stalin und Hitler. Eine Welt im Dunkel* (Berlin, 1997), 322.

¹⁷ Eberhard Fechner, transcription of interview with Erna Wallisch, 15 June 1980, partial transcript of the interview published in *Falter* 7 (2008): 39. Cited within Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press)

be juvenile and petty, these competitions to be “on top” or to get male attention were at the expense of prisoners.

Moreover, there is also testimony from these women about how their actions were motivated by male approval. In Erna Petri’s interrogation, when asked why she killed those children, she stated that, “I lived only among men, who were in the SS and carried out shootings of Jewish persons. I seldom had contact with other women, so in the course of time I became more hardened. Not wanting to stand behind the SS men, I wanted to show them that I, as a woman, could conduct myself like a man.”¹⁸ Here, Petri is admitting that she would commit these acts as a way to prove herself and her capabilities to men.

This violence that these women caused left lasting impacts on those who experienced it/witnessed it. One survivor, Isa Vermehren, described the experience as such:

Red faces, spongy faces, formless faces, ‘visages’ in the worst sense of the word, in which all evil, stupidity, insolence, brutality—in short, the worst of human nature—made its mark. You might think I am exaggerating, but what use is it to point out an exception here or there, when it would only serve to make the general rule all the more apparent? Hands, legs, feet—they were all of the same cloddish nature, which didn’t dare to claim attractiveness. And yet, they all seemed to believe they cut a jaunty figure. There is no other way to account for the shameless display of their own ugliness.¹⁹

¹⁸ Wendy Lower, Rough Translation - Interrogation of Erna Petri, BStU (1961). *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*

¹⁹ Isa Vermehren, *Reise durch den letzten Akt. Ravensbrück, Buchenwald, Dachau: eine Frau berichtet* (Reinbek, 1979), 84. Cited within Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press).

In this account, it is evident that the prisoners themselves could see that the female SS were trying to make themselves look more attractive. Whether that be for themselves or for the male SS, it was obvious that they were trying to gain something from their looks.

New Feelings of Empowerment with Male Validation

Secondly, while proving their worthiness to their male counterparts was a major aspect of conditioning the women, feelings of empowerment was another way of this conditioning process. Morale is a key part in any major political or social movement. In the case of Nazi Germany, boosting the morale of women for the cause was important. The female perpetrators needed something to make them feel strong enough to partake in these events. One of the major ways that this was possible was through how the women dressed. One element of this is the “jack boots.” Vermehren describes them as, “For women in uniform, the strongest effect is felt in the boots which, as though with magnetic force, forced the adoption of a masculine manner of walking. All the *Aufseherinnen* walked in the same way, because all of them were making a clumsy attempt to live up to the ideal—the ideal that had over the previous twelve years been pushed on us through propaganda in word and image.”²⁰ She continues, “It’s nearly impossible to imagine the grotesque hermaphroditic quality of these uniformed beings: bodies entirely female—and with it, the forced masculine movements; stiff manes of curls and thick earrings—paired with culottes and high boots; sad child-like eyes—paired with hard, loud voices; the entire appearance that of a caricature of a cook clothed in the attitude of a general.”²¹ Through this testimony, it is evident that these women were trying to be something

²⁰ Vermehren, *Reise*, 76.

²¹ *Ibid.*

they were not. Additionally, it becomes quite clear that they were forcing themselves to do something to go against an image that was perpetuated on German women from societal norms and propaganda.

The uniforms that the women wore greatly resembles the men's uniforms. One survivor of the Ravensbrück camp described the SS women as, "a homogeneous force of fate that had no personally identifiable traits."²² In photographs of SS women standing near SS men, their uniforms are strikingly similar.²³ In another photograph, the female SS member appeared to be wearing a tie.²⁴ From these same photographs, it is noticeable how the female uniform had a slightly more feminine collar, fanning more outwards and downwards than the apparent male uniform. Additionally, some of the female uniforms included a skirt, while the male uniforms did not.²⁵ In these photographs, there was no obvious jewelry shown as a part of the uniform. Aside from those details, the uniforms are almost identical. The only decorative aspect of their uniforms were any insignia pins or badges -- this goes for both male and female uniforms. With this homogenous way of dressing, the female guards had somewhat lost a feminine projection of themselves, possibly losing a sense of identity.

New Feminism

²² Insa Eschebach, "SS-Aufseherinnen des Frauenkonzentrationslagers Ravensbrück. Erinnerungen ehemaliger Häftlinge." *WerkstattGeschichte* 13 (1996): 39–48. Cited within Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press).

²³ "Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler inspecting the female SS guard." Shown within Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press). Shown in Fig. 1 under "Images."

²⁴ "Private photo of dog handler Herta with "Greif" at Ravensbrück." Shown within Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press). Shown in Fig. 2 under "Images."

²⁵ The Hoecker Album. Image of Nazi officers and female auxiliaries (Helferinnen) pose on a wooden bridge in Solahuette. The man on the right carries an accordion. July 1944. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Anonymous Donor. Shown in fig. 3 under "Images."

Lastly, before this apparent unappreciation for femininity, women wanted to join the Nazi Party/become SS for various reasons. For instance, in most testimonies by the women who joined the Party, there were recruitment officers who made better employment the main selling point for women to join. One female guard, Hermine Braunsteiner, attested to why she signed up in saying, "I knew that a camp was being built in Ravensbrück, the village next to Fürstenberg. The police chief told us only that we would have to supervise prisoners. I didn't ask at the time what kind of prisoners they were, or exactly what our work would entail. But the police chief told us that we would receive lodging and a warm meal, in other words, room and board, along with about 60 to 70 reichsmarks. This was a good salary . . . so I sent an application for employment to the commandant of the camp."²⁶ She was originally in search of a better job, which she stated, "I had a job as an unskilled worker. I worked at the machine that filled the beer bottles. I also worked at other machines, including the washing machine, the labeling machine, and so forth. It was very hard work. That's why I wanted to find another job."²⁷ In her saying this, the quote suggests that "good" work for women -- well paid, good working conditions -- was sparse and that women were in search of better ones. However, recruitment advertisements and propaganda were still present.

One of the recruitment advertisements in a local newspaper read, "Female workers between 20–40 years of age sought for work at a military installation. Remuneration will be made in accordance with the salary agreement for civil service employees (TO.A). Also supplied

²⁶ Statement by Hermine Ryan (née Braunsteiner) on 20 August 1973 in Düsseldorf, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 193, pp. 51ff. Cited within Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press).

²⁷ Ibid.

are: free housing, meals, and clothing (uniform).”²⁸ This advertisement implied that there were not strict criteria for women to be employed at the camps. Additionally, there were instances where employment agencies put women in a situation where they had to take a job at the camps. One of these women, Luzie Breslau, attested to this in saying, “I was working for an accountant, and I started having stomach problems from sitting constantly while hunched over. I had stomach surgery. Then, during the war, I was called to the labor office and told they wanted to put me to work digging trenches. I reminded them of my stomach surgery. Sometime later, they called me in again, and told me that they had found work for me that wouldn’t require physical labor. And if I turned it down, they would send me to a concentration camp for refusing to work.”²⁹ If the women were in a position in which if they refused to work in the camps they would be placed in them as prisoners, they are almost forced to work in the camps. In a similar situation, a woman named Anna M. described her situation in which she volunteered to work in the camps. She stated, “In mid-November 1941 [October 1942], I received notification from the commandant of the Ravensbrück concentration camp for women to report there as a guard. [...] We were especially encouraged to go to Ravensbrück, because they didn’t have enough guards. They told us it would be a pleasant job and we would be able to leave again after three months. So, I went ahead and reported for duty at the Ravensbrück women’s concentration camp. We had no idea what to expect there.”³⁰

²⁸ Janet Anschutz and Irmtraud Heike, *Feinde im eigenen Land. Zwangsarbeit in Hannover im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 2000), 187. Cited within Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press).

²⁹ Statement by Luzie H. on 8 November 1972 in Düsseldorf, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 292, p. 66. Cited within Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press).

³⁰ Statement by Anna M. on 2 August 1961 in Stuttgart, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 234, p. 13. Cited within Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press).

This sense of lost identity through standard Nazi and SS proceedings is evident by the ways in which women made new spaces for themselves within the existing Nazi Party. Some of the organizations that were created by women are the *NS-Frauenschaft* (Nazi Women's Group), *Deutsches Frauenwerk* (German Women's Enterprise), *Frauenarbeitsgemeinschaft* (Women's Working Group), and *Demokratischer Frauenbund* (Democratic Women's Association).^{31,32,33,34} There were also female organizations that had ties with the National Socialist Party, like the National Association of German Women Graduates, the Society of German Women Doctors and the Nazified Civil Servants' Association.^{35,36,37} The existence of associations like these imply that there was a sense of inferiority among or towards the women. In the cases that women were starting these organizations, there could have been tension or a feeling of insecurity among the women to cause them to branch off. However, in the instances where women's organizations outside of the Nazi Party worked alongside them, this shows a side where women were being included in the Nazi mission from the outside looking in, as opposed to women working with the Party from the inside seeking a way to "group off."

In Summation

Finally, as historian Elissa Mailänder stated, "Though SS personnel in the camps perpetrated physical violence on a daily basis, its character, causes, consequences, and dynamics are generally not discussed as independent topics."³⁸ The topic of study the female

³¹ Stephenson, *The Nazi Organization of Women*, 14.

³² *Ibid.*, 17.

³³ *Ibid.*, 226.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Mailänder, *Female SS*, xii.

experience in Nazi Germany is not a neglected topic but not nearly studied as much as their male counterparts. The work and social dynamic within the SS is one that this paper alone cannot explain alone. The environment that the women experienced while being employed at the camps was incredibly different than what most of these women were expecting, as noted by testimony.³⁹ In the instance of the Majdanek camp, none of the women who worked there as guards had a prior criminal record.⁴⁰ One cannot look at the actions of the women and claim that their actions were expected. These were not hardened criminals or desensitized war veterans -- they were average women. Something happened to these women from the time they first started their position in the camp to the time they tortured prisoners; that answer lies within the social structure within the camp itself.

From the very start of their employment at these camps, some of the women did not even want to be there, evident by testimony about the recruitment processes.⁴¹ With this, it is discernable that some of these women were in an uncomfortable position from the beginning. On top of that, working alongside men seemed to spark animosity towards the other women as well as a driving force to feel included among the men. Whether it be attraction or a need to feel included among the men, the male perpetrators had an influence on the behavioral patterns of the women. Similarly, the uniforms played a major role in how the women viewed themselves and the situation that they were in at that moment in time. With the masculine

³⁹ Statement by Anna M. on 2 August 1961 in Stuttgart, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 234, p. 13. Cited within Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press).

⁴⁰ Mailänder, *Female SS*, xi.

⁴¹ Statement by Hermine Ryan (née Braunsteiner) on 20 August 1973 in Düsseldorf, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 193, pp. 51ff. Cited within Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press).

nature of their uniforms, this ultimately tied into a lost sense of identity and homogeneousness among their male counterparts.

With the creations of designated women's groups within the Nazi Party and women's groups that worked alongside the Nazi Party there is some sort of cycle that is evident. From the inside, there are women who are seemingly feeling ostracized or underappreciated in some way to which they created their own organs within the Nazi Party. On the other hand, there are organizations outside of the Party wanting to work alongside them. In working with outside organizations, this exemplifies the attractiveness that the Nazi Party needed in order to be appealing to potential members.

There is no doubt that the actions that these women committed were influenced by the camp environment and the social pressures surrounding them. However, the fundamentals of fascism and extreme nationalism that were shown within the Nazi Party undoubtedly played a role. Scholars agree that gender plays a role in the basis of fascism and its implications are apparent.⁴² While there is an element of uniformity and conformity (us vs. them mentality) within fascism, the divide between men and women within a fascist society is unique. It had been examined that, "It can be seen simply at the social and economic level, where women and men were strictly separated, and women were subordinated and excluded from large sections of the labor market. Or it can be studied at the symbolic level [...]."⁴³ The social difference between men and women is clear within the confines of fascism. With the mistreatment of women perpetrated by men, the social hierarchical divide was further perpetrated and allowed

⁴² Luisa Passerini and Ara Merjian, "Gender, Historiography, and Interpretation of Fascism, *Qui Parle* 13 no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2001): 159.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

for feelings of inferiority of the women working in the camps to emerge. While the female guards would have still committed atrocious acts, their acts were emboldened by systemic misogyny. The feminism that was seen among the female perpetrators was a disordered way of viewing feminism but was nonetheless empowerment. Despite these structures were empowering, the primary enabler of perpetrators actions was the racist, antisemitic, and hateful ideology that fascism bred.

Understanding and researching what caused the female perpetrators is one that might cause controversy, as many times deciphering why something occurred can be misconstrued as approval. From this research, it can be drawn that it was the gendered systems in place, along with propaganda, that lead the women to act the way that they did. The overarching themes that are present in those reasons are rooted in distorted feminism and empowerment, as well as seeking approval from their male counterparts. In addition, the fashion and socialization of these women in the camp environment played a critical role in their indoctrination, and the social hierarchy between the guards in the gendered system of fascism enabled the need for validation, as we see with the female guards resembling both the actions and physical characteristics of the male guards. Given all these reasons, the circumstances were unfavorable to these female guards, but that is still no excuse for their actions. The actions that were perpetrated by the female guards were done from being a part of a cocktail of fascism and patriarchal reinforcement.

Images



Fig. 1: Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler inspecting the female SS guard.



Fig. 2: Private photo of dog handler Herta with "Greif" at Ravensbrück.



Fig. 3: Nazi officers and female auxiliaries (Helferinnen) pose on a wooden bridge in Solahuette. The man on the right carries an accordion.

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