

## Book Review: Women as Collaborators and Agents?

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domestic labour, and as Anderson suggests, recognizing that this work is 'in the best sense, just another job' (p. 114).

Although never stated, as an academic book one may assume that the views expressed are weighted towards a middle-class understanding of the issues. Despite this, it draws extensively on the narratives of many working in domestic service and has therefore much to offer in moving the complex and potentially shameful dynamics of domestic labour to a more public arena. It will serve as an invaluable resource for academics working in the fields of social policy, migration and gender studies, as well as mental health professionals working with people struggling to retain their dignity as they move between the personal and professional within a small and intimate space. However, written in a clear and engaging style, it is equally recommended for all men and women engaged in the arena of domestic employment.

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## WOMEN AS COLLABORATORS AND AGENTS?

Kevin Passmore, ed.

*Women, Gender and Fascism in Europe, 1919–1945*

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, xii + 275 pp., £15. 99, 23.70, ISBN 0-7190-6617-4

In 1983, a German feminist magazine published an article on women and the National Socialists that created an intellectual storm.<sup>1</sup> In her essay, sociologist Irene Stoer discussed the relationship of the umbrella organization Bund Deutscher Frauen – the Alliance of German Women's Associations, or BDF – to the Nazi regime.<sup>2</sup> According to Stoer, the BDF never was part of the Nazi system because the organization positioned itself outside politics. To back her claim, she cited a statement made by a prominent BDFer, Gertrud Bäumer, who declared that political systems and parties did not affect women's struggles.<sup>3</sup> These women,

according to the author, fought for basic rights such as the vote, which German women got in 1919, or other fundamental rights and therefore stayed politically neutral; the goal of the women in this movement was simply 'humanity'. Stoer's argument created heated discussion among feminist scholars, and her argument was denounced as a strategy to exonerate the German women's movement. Her failure to mention the BDF's anti-Semitism was especially targeted. Critics argued that even as early as 1919, anti-Semitic sentiments had made it impossible for Alice Salomon (a converted Jew) to become the leader of the BDF, and that anti-Semitic discourse in the BDF affected the reception of prominent Jewish women's work. The Jewish women's organization (Jüdischer Frauenbund) left the BDF in protest at its extreme conservative political positions and lack of solidarity in May 1933. Even if the BDF claimed 'neutrality', they backed the Nazi regime at the same time, because they refused to dissent. Not only was the declaration of neutrality illusory and ineffectual, the discussion itself points to the fact that even several decades after the war, these issues remained silent and still taboo. A critical debate on the participation and collaboration of women was overdue – in Germany and internationally.

Generally, the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s had seen women principally as victims of the patriarchal system. With the growing number of women's studies scholars, differentiation of scholarly perspectives on women's ability to manoeuvre grew and the perspective started to be revised in the 1980s. Intensified gender study of National Socialism made it obvious that women had always taken an active part in the social power structures of the Nazi regime. Thus, with the discovery of female collaboration in the patriarchal system, the definition of women as collective victims of male domination and aggression no longer sufficed. Of course there were victims – those who were persecuted on racial, ethnic or political grounds – but on the other hand, female camp guards or leaders of Nazi organizations clearly had to be identified as perpetrators and agents. And how to understand the 'silent others', the working-class and middle-class women, the wives, mothers, 'neutral' activists? Were they 'co-perpetrators' (*Mit-Täter*) and 'accomplices' (*Komplizinnen*) as the German social scientist Christina Thürmer-Rohr (1990) later put it? In the years following, debate became further differentiated: difference/equality, the binary gender difference, heteronormativity, which aims towards essentialism. However, all these discussions opened ways for broader research and new critical perspectives on women's participation in fascist movements.

Kevin Passmore's collection shows that much has been done in the last 20 years. Investigations of women as collaborators and beneficiaries of the patriarchal systems are apparently no longer taboo, and the deadly dichotomy of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' has disappeared. Moreover, the growing amount of research and lively debates among feminist scholars has revealed the various layers of human agency, of biographical contradictions, of breaks, continuities and transformations in lives, and of social power structures. The essays started life as papers at a conference held at Cardiff University in the summer of 2001, where historians from various countries discussed 'Women, Gender and the Extreme Right in Europe'. Passmore, a lecturer in history at Cardiff University and author of a book on fascism (Passmore, 2002), had organized this meeting of scholars to compare current research on gender and fascism in Central and Eastern Europe with that of Western Europe. Going through the programme on the internet, one deeply regrets not having participated in this arrangement of speakers and discussants. Luckily, most contributions are included in the book, although while the conference programme approached the subject thematically and by nation, the

publication at issue only follows the latter approach. Essays by 13 authors provide a broad range of perspectives on Italy (Perry Willson), Germany (Kirsten Heinsohn), Romania (Maria Bucur), Hungary (Mária M. Kovács), Yugoslavia (Carol S. Lilly on Serbia and Melissa Bokovoy on Croatia), Latvia (Mara I. Lazda), Poland (Dobrochna Kalwa), France (Cheryl Koos and Daniella Sarnoff), Spain (Mary Vincent), Britain (Martin Durham) as well as Europe as a whole (Kevin Passmore). The essays follow basic questions, and in the last chapter Passmore presents a comparative analysis of the various issues raised in the earlier chapters.

First, however, Passmore develops the book's two areas of interest – women and gender, and fascism and the non-fascist extreme right – in his informative introduction. He thoroughly introduces the 1980s *Historikerinnen-Streit* between American historian Claudia Koonz and German historian Gisela Bock, thereby providing an overview of what became an internationally known discussion on women, gender, and National Socialism. In her book, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, Claudia Koonz (1986) argues that German women had empowered themselves by making use of the Nazi idealization of family. As a result, they became part of the Nazi system, and had equal opportunities to take part in the collective of perpetrators. They thus shared responsibility with male Germans. Gisela Bock, author of *Zwangssterilisation in Nationalsozialismus* (Bock, 1986), describing Nazi forced sterilization, contradicted this theory. Her argument is that the idealization of the family did not empower women but undermined women's control over their bodies. To Passmore, the debate exemplified what he detected as the basic (and at that time polarized) conflict: 'difference feminism' (p. 2), theorizing permanent differences between men and women, or 'equality and intervention' (p. 5), seeing the social position and power of women within the system. Concerning his second area of interest, Passmore proves that he is an expert on studies of fascism as well as on the extreme right. His summary is in a concentrated and well-structured form that includes questions about the deconstruction of binary oppositions that are current in gender studies: 'Women are no longer seen simply as such as victims or victimizers, but as both simultaneously' (p. 9). Clearly, this principle of simultaneity is crucial to understanding women's roles during the war and also in the postwar reconstruction period.

My main criticism of this volume concerns the period it covers: why does the analysis in the entire book stop with 1945 (or before)? I think it would have been worth looking at how political/social interests after the war were pursued. Did these women follow the paths on which they had embarked in relation to fascism, did they retreat, or did they try to make different choices? These questions could possibly shed light on continuities in the fascist or extreme-right movements – as well as why scholarly interest in women and fascism appeared so late. Overall, though, Passmore's introduction poses a set of important questions that serves to engage the reader with the subsequent national studies in the collection.

The essays mainly focus on the history of women in organizations and not so much on 'no name' individuals. Beginning with Italy, the pioneering country of European fascism, Perry Willson's essay explains the different contexts in which fascist women acted. Since their field of activity was mainly in the welfare sphere, some (middle-class) women were able to establish new roles for themselves in the name of the new state and the increasing importance of welfare. Surprisingly, we read that a substantial number of them had been feminists; as a result of the First World War, some of them had moved to a conservative nationalistic position, demanding equal legal rights and thereby urging complementarity and collaboration between women and men. Positing socially or politically active women prior to the First World War as 'feminists' requires, I think, further elaboration,

particularly since, in the fascist period, women's reality was female subordination in the male-dominated hierarchy. As Willson elaborates in her essay: 'Fascist women never obtained any actual political power and were not allowed to formulate any of their own policy except at the most local level' (p. 24). A similar conclusion is drawn by Kirsten Heinsohn, who discusses *völkisch* and other conservative women's organizations. Many of these organizations already existed in the 1920s, and they were very often Christian-affiliated and anti-Semitic and oriented towards improving living conditions. In order to create a mass movement, the National Socialists incorporated most of these organizations. They presented themselves as modern and pro-equality, an organization where women were seen as companions of the men. In quoting Joseph Goebbels' diary, Heinsohn describes what this meant: 'The man is the organizer of life, the woman his helper and his executive' (p. 54). To many women, even former feminists, this ideology did not appear to contradict what they thought. In another essay, Mary Vincent discusses the feminization of Spanish politics as a result of possible female votes for the conservatives. This change was connected with the collapse of the monarchy and the rise of fascism, but never did it mean to empower women. As part of the Francoist mobilization of women, the *Sección Femenina* translated as engagement into welfare or medical services: 'the Franco regime stressed the involvement of women, not against their "natural" aptitudes and social role but because of them. Women's supposedly apolitical nature allowed them to demonstrate the Franco regime's natural order, its moral superiority to the Republic, and its compatibility with the essence of traditional Spain' (p. 213). Vincent is the only author in the book who at least briefly pursues the historical process after the war, since Francoism continued after 1945.

The case studies in this volume make it clear that even if the religious, cultural, national and political backgrounds are different, a similar structure of female exclusion is visible in all the countries represented. Fascism, through its opposition to previous regimes, mobilized and incorporated women who had been previously excluded and therefore many women joined the fascist movements. At the same time, however, these movements never accepted equal female participation. Women's organizations within the fascist systems appeared to be useful and necessary, but their activities were always watched, and their female leaders were appointed carefully. Passmore's conclusion pulls together a Europe-wide perspective, discussing each essay of the book in view of the questions posed in his introduction. In this (once more, excellent) chapter, he also differentiates the terms 'feminist women' and 'women's movement', something that was missing in all the previous essays. The minimum criterion for being a feminist was the goal to end female subordination to men. Therefore, different strategies (fighting for equality between men and women or to maintain differences between the sexes) deriving from different political ideologies became important. Passmore sees in conservative religious women's groups, where patriarchal order was not questioned but rather strengthened constitution of an explicitly non-feminist component. 'International comparison shows that while the conservative women's movement had the greater affinities with fascism, feminists of any persuasion were capable of turning to the extreme right' he concludes (p. 243). Such analyses make it possible to see where new research is necessary (as do many of the chapters presented in this book). Its comparative perspective allows a critical understanding of the dynamics which were connected to political developments: many nations were recovering from the First World War, and were still under monarchy or had experiences of social struggles and defeats, which had caused upheaval within their societies.

Given the lack of space for a book review, I am unfortunately only able briefly to describe three national studies here. These are, hopefully, sufficient to make readers curious to learn more about the various countries with histories just as fascinating, and essays just as engaging, as those discussed here. This rich and highly engaging collection of current research on gender and fascism, 'aimed at undergraduate students of history, politics, sociology and women's studies, as well as their teachers, and researchers in the field of the extreme right and women's gender history' (according to its own copy), truly offers new understandings of its subject matter. It shows that – like men – women chose to take part in extreme-right power systems. It elucidates how, and on what grounds, the various fascist or extreme-right organizations included or excluded women. Furthermore, it offers a complex and nuanced perspective on how socially active women in the various European countries responded to the fascist or extreme-right movements, and why they were attracted to far-right movements that manifestly denigrated their rights. Passmore's book offers insights from different perspectives, and I can only hope that it finds its way into libraries and not onto student curricula.

## NOTES

1. Irene Stoer wrote an essay titled 'Machtergriffen' (Taken to Power) in *Courage, Berliner Frauenzeitschrift*.
2. The BDF consisted of 2500 organizations with half a million members. It existed from 1894 until its self-dissolution in 1933.
3. 'Für die Durchsetzung der Frauenbewegung ist es sekundär, ob es sich um einen parlamentarischen, demokratischen oder faschistischen Staat handelt.'

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