CHAPTER 1

Introduction
Gender, War, and the Holocaust

> "Do you understand that I need to understand . . . how a human being can remain indifferent[?] The executioners I understood; also the victims, though with more difficulty. For the others, all the others, those who were neither for nor against, those who sprawled in passive patience . . . those who were permanently and merely spectators – all were closed to me, incomprehensible."
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> Elie Wiesel, 1982[1]

In 1945, the American authorities charged Ilse Koch, the infamous "Bitch of Buchenwald" whose husband ran the Buchenwald concentration camp from 1937 to 1941, with numerous cruelties toward prisoners. She was accused of hitting inmates if they looked at her the wrong way, of selecting tattooed prisoners to be killed, and of turning "the skin of tattooed inmates into lampshades, gloves, knife sheaths, [and] book covers."[2] When Koch was tried for her offenses, notions of gender drastically impacted the arguments of both the prosecution and the defense. Koch emphasized her dependent status *vis-à-vis* her husband: "I was a housewife and I think my power is being overestimated because if I have three . . . children, then I am so occupied all day long that I have neither the intention nor [the] time to take care of camp matters."[3] To counter this perception, the prosecution pointed to a directive by Commandant Koch "to the SS to the effect that orders by her [*Frau* Koch] were to be obeyed to the same extent as if he had given them."[4] Koch initially received a life sentence, but Lucius Clay, the American military governor of Germany, overturned the ruling for lack of evidence (and because the beginning of the Cold War made it politically expedient). Koch's story does not end there, however. Counteracting Clay, the US Senate called for a hearing on Ilse Koch and appointed the Ferguson Commission to investigate her case. Again referencing gender, the commission found her guilty as charged: "Most of the defendants tried with her could avail themselves of the plea

that they were part of a military organization and as such were obliged to carry out orders regardless of how much they personally opposed them. In contrast, every act committed by Ilse Koch as shown by the evidence was that of a volunteer. . . . Being a woman made her participation more unnatural and more deliberate."[5] In spite of these recommendations, the Americans, who were eager to avoid double jeopardy, did not try her again, but released her to the German authorities, who sentenced her to life in prison for offenses against German citizens.

As Koch's story shows, gender interferes with the perception of political and moral agency on every level. It can serve to minimize and even erase women's responsibility for the Nazi war and genocide, but it can also heighten the sense of culpability.[6] And the obfuscation of guilt and complicity is not the only way in which gender impacts our perception of women's roles in war and genocide. In addition to altering perceptions of guilt, notions of gender can also make female suffering and victimization invisible. This erasure of both guilt and suffering has much to do with concepts of war that exclude the experiences of women. John Keegan, the illustrious historian of war, notably defines warfare as "the one human activity from which women, with the most insignificant exceptions, have always and everywhere stood apart."[7] To this day, the Second World War is generally perceived as a male enterprise even though women accompanied the army as auxiliaries and nurses and even though civilians, that is, women, old people, and children, comprised two-thirds of its victims.[8] Tellingly, as feminist historian Linda Grant de Pauw points out, until recently the deaths of civilians were simply "not classified as 'casualties'" but rather as "collateral damage."[9] In other words, even though women contributed to the war effort on many levels and even though civilian deaths outnumbered military deaths by far, women did not feature in the official record of the war.

It would appear that, when it comes to women in the Second World War, we are dealing with two different kinds of invisibility. Both the active participation of women in war and genocide, their contributions to the war effort as secretaries, army auxiliaries, and nurses, their roles as eager helpers and even perpetrators in Hitler's killing fields,[10] *and* their suffering as refugees, rape victims, and concentration camp inmates need to become part of the official narrative of the Second World War. It is the goal of this book to contribute to this shift in perception by highlighting the many ways in which concepts of gender trouble our ideas of war and confuse our perception of guilt and suffering. Specifically, I argue that the disinterest in female war stories carries in its wake a concomitant neglect of structures of

complicity, which are to be distinguished from instances of perpetration. Thus, in recovering women's voices, we also begin to understand the fundamental parameters that are at the heart of what I call a "grammar of complicity": a web of ruptured narratives, conceptual and visual blind spots, and silences.

In order to shed light on female complicity in the Second World War and the Holocaust, I examine various forms of life writing, including diaries, memoirs, "docunovels," and autobiographically inspired novels. But before I do so, I would like to explicate the contexts and discourses that shape our perception of these texts: the nexus of gender and warfare, the concept of complicity, the roles of women in the National Socialist regime, and the genre of memoir. Since all instances of female agency and victimization that form the subject matter of this book occur within the context of warfare, I begin by parsing the conceptual blind spots that attend to discussions of gender and war. I then focus on one specific blind spot, namely the interrelation of gender and complicity. Although recent studies have shown that women were among the ranks of some of the worst Nazi perpetrators, the majority of the female citizens of the Third Reich must be categorized as bystanders who were complicit with, but not themselves agents of Nazi crimes. More often than not, their guilt pertains to sins of omission. They did not act cruelly themselves, but were complicit with the cruelty of others. In order to provide a framework in which we can understand their actions, I discuss the concept of complicity in general and the roles and standing of women in the Third Reich in particular. Finally, I have chosen to juxtapose memoirs with some works of (autobiographically inspired) fiction because these fictional works help to situate the memoirs in the discursive contexts that shaped either these texts or our reception of them. Moreover, at times, fictional works offer solutions to the dilemmas that remain "raw scars"[11] in memoirs. Since memoirs rely on a set of assumptions quite different from those that apply to fiction, I give a brief overview of the specific challenges presented by this form of life writing.

Women and War

It has often been pointed out that war has a drastic impact on gender roles. For example, in her edited collection *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe's Twentieth Century*, feminist historian Dagmar Herzog notes the "convulsive and potentially transformative impacts of wars on gender roles and relations."[12] In some contexts, wars have even been endowed with an

emancipatory energy: as husbands and fathers become soldiers, wives and daughters gain authority and power in the domestic realm; similarly, as male employees and workers are drafted for frontline service, women gain access to public arenas and to forms of employment that were previously closed to them. Several studies have shown that the First and Second World Wars offered women new forms of freedom and new opportunities, including "skilled, high-paying jobs in heavy industry; new positions in government bureaucracies, educational institutions, the armed forces, and on the front lines as ambulance drivers, medics, and resistantes."[13]

Undoubtedly, wars change gender roles, but it is equally true that gender changes war. In the edited collection *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender, and Literary Representation*, literary scholar Helen M. Cooper calls gender a "crucial organizing principle in the war system."[14] To be sure, gender, both as reality and as ideology, exerts a profound influence on the execution and representation of war and genocide. Consequently, attending to the roles of women in war is crucial not only for our understanding of women's history but also for our perception of warfare: if we focus on the experiences of women, we realize that aspects of war that are frequently relegated to the periphery and dissociated from the "actual" violence of war – the experience of the refugee, the suffering of the concentration camp inmate, but no less the bureaucratic work involved in conducting a war – are in fact central to its functioning. This is all the more true in the Second World War, which blurred the boundaries between battlefield and home front in significant ways. By directly targeting civilian populations either through genocidal policies or through so-called counterinsurgency strategies such as the "Commissar Order" (*Kommissarbefehl*),[15] but also through carpet bombing and displacement of large populations, meaningful distinctions between front line and rear became increasingly redundant. In light of this melding of front and rear, it stands to reason that, if our notion of war is funneled through the perspective of the soldier, it is liable to remain "obsessed with the experience of a very small portion of the large populations implicated in modern warfare" and, consequently, much of what constitutes modern warfare is left out.[16] As Hanley puts it, "canons and cannons have more in common than the accident of sounding alike."[17] If, however, we succeed in including the voices of women, we not only gain insights into how warfare affects women but also begin to develop a fuller and more complex understanding of the scope and nature of modern wars and genocide. In particular, I argue that turning our attention toward the experiences of women allows us to gain a deeper understanding of a group

that was crucial for the execution of the Holocaust, but that has often been overlooked: that of the complicitous bystander.

Complicity

Ranging from historical studies of concentration camp guards to numerous biographies and films about the worst offenders of the National Socialist regime, there is a great deal of literature about Nazi perpetrators. There is also an increasing amount of research on those who were victimized in the Holocaust and the Nazi war of conquest. In contrast, there is little on those women and men who can be classified as complicit bystanders.[18] Although bystanders constituted the majority of the German population, few historians, as Elizabeth Harvey reminds, "have concerned themselves with those whose narratives are those of collaboration and compromise with racist movements and repressive regimes . . . sometimes playing down, but sometimes presenting with pride, their past attitudes and actions."[19] And yet the successful execution of the Nazis' genocidal program would have been unthinkable without the passivity, apathy, or silent assent of this group. As Simon Wiesenthal points out, the Nazi "minority reigned because of the cowardice and laziness of the majority."[20] I believe we should take Wiesenthal's insight to heart. Indifference, inertia, and timidity lack the sensationalist appeal of stories of atrocity and cruelty, but they are nonetheless directly and causally linked to the Holocaust. Recent studies show that the majority of the German population never approved of genocidal policies, but they also show that widespread support for the mass killing of Jews was not necessary for the seamless execution of the Holocaust. Rather, an "anti-Jewish consensus" in the German population was enough to make the Holocaust possible.[21]

I believe that the sparsity of studies that focus on bystanders is related to the dearth of studies on women's participation in war and genocide. Indeed, historian Karen Hagemann makes a similar point when she calls "women's participation in the Wehrmacht . . . one of the best-repressed subjects in postwar Germany" and wonders whether this omission has to do with the fact that women's involvement "illustrate[s] most clearly the everyday participation of the many."[22] In many ways, women would seem to be the prime contenders for the title of bystander. Because they were, at least for the most part, excluded from leadership positions, they do not typically rank among the worst offenders of the regime and are consequently more likely found among the bystanders. Similarly, because women, unlike men, were identified with the domestic realm, they could

more easily shed public obligations and are thus less likely to incur the responsibility tied to official functions. But this distance from the political domain does not necessarily exonerate the female sex. To be sure, some have claimed that women, precisely because they are frequently seen as apolitical and lack experience in the public sphere, should be forgiven their sins of omission, their failure to resist where resistance was necessary. But one might also conclude that the contributions they did make weigh all the more heavily since, unlike the actions of the soldier who was drafted to serve, they can justifiably be categorized as voluntary.[23]

Even if we disregard the complications introduced by gender discourses, the question of complicity is a highly complex and contested moral quandary. Complicity, as Lepora and Goodin point out, "comes on a sliding scale."[24] In determining the degree of a person's complicity, many factors are relevant. There is the gravity of the offense with which one is complicit and the question of "shared purposes" with the principal offender.[25] There is the moral valence of one's own contribution: is it wrong in and of itself or morally neutral? Is it an essential contribution or rather inconsequential? There is also the fact that, in the context of the Holocaust, we are dealing not only with acts of commission but also with sins of omission.[26] As Gordon Horwitz argues, "the failure to act, the failure to inquire, the failure to remember, each represent a contribution to the killing project."[27] Furthermore, the seriousness of the moral failure implied in complicity is also directly proportional to the degree to which one's action was voluntary and conducted in full knowledge of the purpose to which one was contributing. Especially the latter two criteria pose problems in the context of the Holocaust.

Many who failed to oppose the regime have argued that they were not cognizant of the Holocaust. Although these proclamations of ignorance may be truthful in individual cases, there is reason to doubt that vast segments of the German population remained completely in the dark about the murderous consequences of Nazi racial policy. Indeed, numerous studies have shown that much information was available through different channels. For example, even those who had never heard of extermination camps could have become aware of the magnitude of the genocidal killings through average soldiers who had participated in the mass executions of Jewish men, women, and children on the eastern front.[28] More importantly, even those who remained utterly untouched by the Nazis' genocidal rage must have been aware of the escalating discrimination against and persecution of Jewish citizens, plainly evident in the Nuremberg Laws, the highly visible violence of *Reichskristallnacht*,

the public auctions of dispossessed Jewish property, and the deportations, whose victims frequently had to gather in public squares and were marched through town on their way to the train station under the gawking eyes of locals.[29] Given this wealth of information, it would seem that, in many cases, ignorance of the plight of the Jews was willful and culpable, a form of "prudent disregard," as Horwitz notes of the civilian population of Mauthausen that learned to turn a blind eye to genocidal atrocities in the local concentration camp.[30] In other words, we are dealing not with a lack of information, but with reinterpretations, evasions, and rationalizations.[31]

While some excuse their passivity with ignorance, others who went along with or failed to protest the criminal actions of the regime argue that they acted under duress; a claim that one should certainly take seriously since it is well known that the Nazis sanctioned oppositional behavior in various ways ranging from banal to life-threatening, and one could never be sure at which end of the spectrum the official response would fall. In some cases, a refusal to participate in the discrimination of Jews impeded one's chances at professional advancement; in other cases, casual criticism of the regime could lead to arrest, imprisonment, and even death.[32] But there are also numerous instances when men and women defied the regime through small acts of kindness or straightforward refusals to engage in wrongdoing and did not suffer any negative consequences.[33] Clearly, the crux of the matter consists in the fact that, while, in retrospect, it is easy to disentangle perceived risks from actual dangers, at the time such differentiations were arguably much harder to come by. After all, arbitrariness and unpredictability form part of the design of tyrannical regimes and contribute significantly to their effective control of populations. As a result, there are many cases where it is impossible to draw a clear line between bystanders and collaborators or even between collaborators and perpetrators.[34] At the same time, however, there is much to suggest that there were more opportunities for defiance and resistance, however small, than people dared or cared to avail themselves of.[35] Moreover, even if it remains difficult to reconstruct with any certainty all facts and perceptions that determined individual decisions in any given situation, we can gain a better understanding of the general parameters that circumscribed women's actions in the Third Reich by turning our attention to the reality and ideology of National Socialist gender politics.

Women in the Nazi State

Until the 1980s, feminist research conceived of the Third Reich as an exceedingly sexist, patriarchal state that reduced women to the three Ks

of "*Kinder*, *Küche*, *Kirche*" (children, kitchen, church) and promised the "emancipation of woman from emancipation."[36] (Tellingly, the Nazi Party was the only major party that had not endorsed women's suffrage, in line with Hitler's conviction that women's liberation is a product of the Jewish intellect.[37]) In recent decades, however, feminist scholars have complicated this notion: women were not always or exclusively victims of National Socialist ideology and politics. Rather, their position in the National Socialist state was complex and multidimensional. While the Nazis severely limited women's access to the political and professional arenas, they also opened up numerous new opportunities for "Aryan" women and invited them to participate in the transformation of German society on a national scale.[38]

Initially, women were slow to support the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP). The frequently cited allegation that women elected Hitler to power has long been revealed to be an unfounded, misogynist variant of the stab-in-the-back legend.[39] Although 48 percent of all female voters supported Hitler, they represented only 15 percent of all German women, hardly a sign of disproportionate female enthusiasm for the Nazis. Especially in the early years of the NSDAP, male party members outnumbered female party members by far. In 1935, for example, only 5.5 percent of all party members were female, almost half of whom were housewives.[40] During the next ten years, however, more and more women joined Nazi institutions and organizations. Thus, in 1941, roughly 6 million women, that is, every fifth German woman, were members of the formally independent *NS-Frauenwerk* or the *NS-Frauenschaft*, which was integrated into the NSDAP.[41]

The Nazis were expert at recruiting women for the cause by appealing to both baser and higher instincts. Some women felt validated by Nazi racial ideology and clung to their purported superiority over Jews and Russians;[42] others did not consider confinement to the home a change from their previous situation but rather appreciated the glorification of their roles as housewives and mothers; conversely, those who were publicly minded responded to Nazi rhetoric that called for sacrifices for the nation. Over and over again, Nazi women's leader Gertrud Scholtz-Klink appealed to women's desire to serve a greater purpose and to live up to the "sacred duty of every single person in the service of the people's community."[43] Scholtz-Klink kept reminding women that the *Führer* was counting on them and, in so doing, elevated women's sense of self-importance: "The *Führer* has given us the responsibility for all German people."[44] Similarly, in a speech on September 8, 1934, Scholtz-Klink appealed to women's desire to play

a decisive role in the history of the German people: "Then she herself notices one day: I myself am history! And a deep insight comes over her: what is *Volk*? – I am *Volk*."[45]

Paradoxically, the patriarchal Nazi state, which excluded women from almost all party offices and functions, succeeded in recruiting large segments of the female population for a common cause in ways that the Weimar Republic had not. Scholtz-Klink's words did not fall on deaf ears, but were received eagerly by many young German women who were burning to make a difference. Renate Finckh, for example, a member of the Hitler Youth who wrote a memoir about her time in the League of German Girls (*Bund Deutscher Mädel*) (BDM), remembers the pride she felt when she was asked to serve her "*Volk*": "To be truly needed for a higher goal filled me with happiness and pride."[46] To Finckh, the Nazis offered "an emotional home, a safe shelter and soon also a place of recognition."[47]

Clearly, some aspects of National Socialist ideology and practice enhanced the self-esteem of Aryan women, allowed for the development of leadership skills and an active role in public life via organizations such as the *Deutsches Frauenwerk*, the *Deutsche Arbeitsfront* (German Labor Front), or the League of German Girls, and appealed to their desire to make a difference and work toward a purpose larger than themselves.[48] However, while the Nazis allowed for certain, nationally defined forms of female self-actualization, women's empowerment had distinct limits. Particularly in the early years of the regime, a number of policies sought to foreclose employment for women. Thus, a 1933 act called for the dismissal of double earners, that is, of married women whose husbands were gainfully employed. Similarly, the marriage loan program promised interest-free loans to newlywed couples if the wife left her employment until the loan was repaid.[49] In addition, the Nazis imposed numerous restrictions on female professionals. In 1936, Hitler decided that women could not become judges or lawyers, while female doctors faced increasing hurdles. And yet, in spite of these ideological limits, in later years, obstacles to female employment frequently gave way to the exigencies of a struggling war economy. In other words, the longer the war lasted, the more reality interfered with policy. While the Nazis never changed their ideas about women and work or female participation in the army, they either quietly ignored ideological gender precepts or reinterpreted female labor as service for the fatherland.[50] Thus, while the Nazis rejected the notion of a female soldier to the end, the so-called second army of female auxiliaries grew drastically. Driven by the pressures of a war on two fronts, the Nazis could

not afford to be consistent in their effort to exclude women from public and professional life. Thus, the campaign against double earners ceased; women who received marriage loans were again allowed to work; and the quota that had reduced the number of female students to no more than 10 percent of the entire student body in December 1933 was lifted in 1935. By 1941 most men served in the army and almost 50 percent of all students were female.

Scholars who advocate a universal victim status of women in the Third Reich tend to emphasize that formal decrees excluded women from leadership positions in the National Socialist Party and in the administration of the Nazi state. This is certainly true, but it does not follow from this that women bore no responsibility for the Nazi war and genocide. Rather, numerous German women participated in the execution of Nazi policy on all levels, even if those policies were formulated by men:[51] female secretaries typed lists of executions and records of expropriated Jewish property; they composed the minutes of Nazi conferences and scheduled appointments for sterilization courts. Female telephone operators communicated the logistical arrangements of deportations;[52] female neighbors and housewives denounced strangers and acquaintances;[53] and wives and girlfriends provided emotional support to their male companions who were engaged in the business of genocide.

Women who fulfilled these functions were not only aware of the genocidal nature of the Nazi state but were also instrumental in ensuring the efficient implementation of Nazi policy and, by extension, the stability of the Nazi regime. To be sure, in many cases, women's participation was not as clear and direct as the actions of female guards in Nazi concentration camps, but consisted rather in mundane and indirect contributions, such as running a farm while the husband was away, or expressed itself not as action but as the absence of action, such as an unwillingness or inability to resist the policies of the Nazi regime. Consider, for example, all the women physicians or housewives' associations that were all too willing to purge their Jewish members.[54] Even then, however, one cannot speak of innocence since, as Schlink explains, "the act of not renouncing, not judging and not repudiating carries its own guilt with it."[55]

Clearly, the assumption that female guilt is limited to "corruptibility by the patriarchal society" has been discredited beyond repair,[56] and any attempt at a "'disposal of the female past' via the notion of the 'grace of a female birth'" is doomed to fail.[57] If, in spite of these findings, female complicity is often overlooked even today, it is precisely because women's contributions to war and genocide typically consisted of either inaction or