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I

Interpreting the Private under National
Socialism

New Approaches

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1 Introduction

Reconsidering Private Life under the Nazi Dictatorship

*Elizabeth Harvey, Johannes Hürter, Maiken Umbach
 and Andreas Wirsching*

To begin with, two snapshots, one from 1933 and one from 1941. In November 1933 ‘Elisabeth from Berlin’ had problems with her parents, but knew where to turn: she wrote to the magazine *Die junge Dame* (*The Young Lady*) for advice.¹ She presented herself as a committed fan of the magazine, who would read its contents aloud to the BDM group (*Bund Deutscher Mädel*, League of German Girls) that she led. Her parents, she complained, insisted that she be chaperoned everywhere she went. The published editorial response took Elisabeth’s side, congratulated her on winning over new readers via her BDM group and suggested that if she was responsible enough to lead a BDM group, she was also responsible enough to be trusted out on her own: ‘Tell them that a girl who leads a group of young girls must know what she wants.’² This episode casts an interesting light on the history of the private. As elsewhere, in Nazi Germany, personal aspirations and conflicts featured as topics of interest, entertainment and discussion in the media, which provided a public audience for seemingly private concerns: one of many instances of blurred boundaries between supposedly distinct ‘spheres’. And in Nazi Germany, as in many other modern societies, norms and expectations about privacy and personal autonomy within families were anything but uniform. But there are specificities here too that related to the newly installed Nazi regime. The magazine legitimated Elisabeth’s bid for private autonomy through her political achievements; Elisabeth in turn regarded the magazine – with its emphasis on self-realisation, celebrity chat, film stars, beauty and ‘personal problems’ – as a resource to sustain the attention of her group within a Nazi youth organisation in which

¹ See ‘Elisabeth aus Berlin’, *Die junge Dame* 1/23 (1933), 5 Nov. 1933, 22. On the magazine, see Sylvia Lott, *Die Frauenzeitschriften von Hans Huffzky und John Jahr: Zur Geschichte der deutschen Frauenzeitschrift zwischen 1933 und 1970* (Berlin, 1985), 194–311; see also Chapter 9 by Lu Seegers in this volume.

² ‘Machen Sie ihnen klar, daß ein Mädel, das eine Gruppe junger Mädchen führt, wissen muss, was sie will.’

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membership was still voluntary.³ Private self-optimisation, this suggests, could be mobilised for a regime that promised not just to change the political system but also to revolutionise German lifestyles.

The second snapshot: the author Jochen Klepper, recording in his diary the progress of his Wehrmacht unit through Ukraine, captured a peaceful moment on a sunny Sunday, 3 August 1941, in his quarters in the village of Pestchana, a few kilometres behind the front line. He evoked an idyllic, homely scene, a private moment with a few comrades in the shade of a pear tree in a big garden run to wild, where they sat reading letters from home and then laid a table for coffee, decorating it with flowers and serving the ‘good honey’ they had secured. ‘Then we all sat sewing or reading the newspaper at the garden table, with our steel helmets lying next to us giving a distinctive touch to our little group, because an enemy bomber was circling our village. But nothing happened.’⁴ Klepper’s bucolic and domestic scene emphasised how he and his comrades preserved and performed their private identity as husbands and fathers within the military collective, and a couple of weeks later he noted how it was the done thing to show family photos to comrades. He was initially reluctant to do the same, but was then amused by reactions to photos of his wife, Hanni (‘she cannot be older than 25!’).⁵ In October 1941 Klepper was forced to leave the Wehrmacht because his wife was Jewish. His desperate efforts in the course of 1942 to enable his wife and stepdaughter to emigrate came to nothing, and in December 1942 the three of them committed suicide in their Berlin flat.⁶ Thinking about Klepper’s diary and its context suggests further motifs and questions for a history of the private under Nazism. On one hand, Klepper is deliberately highlighting his own family role and the importance of private life for men in the Wehrmacht. For all the propagandistic manipulation of the connection fostered between home front and fighting front by *Feldpost* (the forces postal service) and home leave, Klepper’s diary entry underlines the private importance of letters as a focus of time off duty, and

³ On the history of the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* see Dagmar Reese, *Growing Up Female in Nazi Germany* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2006).

⁴ Jochen Klepper, *Überwindung: Tagebücher und Aufzeichnungen aus dem Kriege* (Stuttgart, 1958), 124.

⁵ Entry on 24 Aug. 1941, ‘Ich bin sehr vorsichtig mit dem Vorzeigen von Bildern von [zu] Hause: aber bei den Landsern spielt das eine solche Rolle, daß man Frau, Kind und Haus nicht geheimhalten kann. Diese Begeisterung über Haus und Garten, Renate. Aber der 22jährige Unteroffizier Werner Kurz war heute nicht minder begeistert von Hanni, die doch “höchstens 25 Jahre alt sein kann”.’ Ibidem, 161.

⁶ See Markus Baum, *Jochen Klepper* (Schwarzenfeld, 2011); Harald Seubert, *Auch wer zur Nacht geweinet’: Jochen Klepper (1903–1942). Eine Vergegenwärtigung* (Wesel, 2014); see also Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation under Arms, 1939–1945* (London, 2015), 262–3.

family photos as a marker of status within a male environment. It also suggests how the privilege of a ‘normal’ private life served to integrate German men into National Socialism and its devastating war. Yet the subsequent story of the Klepper family reminds us how precarious private life was under a racist dictatorship: the regime destroyed the private lives of those who did not conform to National Socialist norms, before eradicating their very existence.

These two examples point to the complexities of exploring the private under National Socialism, but perhaps also to a hint of what is to be gained. Recent years have seen a growth of interest in the private life of leading Nazis, evident in the recent scholarly edition of Himmler’s private correspondence⁷ and a study of Hitler at home,⁸ as well as older popular works such as *Die Frauen der Nazis*.⁹ The wider historiography on Nazism since around 2000 too has been informed by a concern to explore – alongside mechanisms of community formation, group bonding and collective mobilisation – the leeway that the Nazi regime allowed for individual self-realisation and the pursuit of private satisfaction.¹⁰ At the same time, new research has also shed further light on how the regime eroded and destroyed the private sphere of those it persecuted on political and ‘racial’ grounds.¹¹ In this volume, we suggest that these two are best understood as two sides of the same coin. The regime was eager

⁷ See Katrin Himmler and Michael Wildt (eds.), *Himmler privat: Briefe eines Massenmörders* (Munich, 2014).

⁸ See Despina Stratigakos, *Hitler at Home* (New Haven, CT, London, 2015).

⁹ See Anna Maria Sigmund, *Die Frauen der Nazis* (Vienna, 1998), critically discussed in Johanna Gehmacher, ‘Im Umfeld der Macht: Populäre Perspektiven auf Frauen der NS-Elite’, in Elke Fritsch and Christina Herkommer (eds.), *Nationalsozialismus und Geschlecht: Zur Popularisierung und Ästhetisierung von Körper, Rasse und Sexualität im ‘Dritten Reich’ und nach 1945* (Bielefeld, 2009), 49–69.

¹⁰ See Andrew Stuart Bergerson, *Ordinary Germans in Extraordinary Times: The Nazi Revolution in Hildesheim* (Bloomington, IN, 2004); Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA, 2008); Mary Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives: Generations and Violence through the German Dictatorships* (Oxford, 2011); Moritz Föllmer, *Individuality and Modernity in Berlin: Self and Society from Weimar to the Wall* (Cambridge, 2013); most recently: Stargardt, *The German War*; Janosch Steuer, ‘Ein Drittes Reich, wie ich es auffasse’: *Politik, Gesellschaft und privates Leben in Tagebüchern 1933–1939* (Göttingen, 2017).

¹¹ See Beate Meyer, ‘Grenzüberschreitungen: Eine Liebe zu Zeiten des Rassenwahns’, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 55 (2007), 916–36; Andrea Löw, Doris L. Bergen and Anna Hájková (eds.), *Alltag im Holocaust: Jüdisches Leben im Großdeutschen Reich 1941–1945* (Munich, 2013). The volumes of the multivolume document edition *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland* contain numerous items documenting the erosion and destruction of the private lives of Jews in the ‘Greater German Reich’ and in occupied Europe. The volumes will begin appearing in English translation from 2019, www.edition-judenverfolgung.de/neu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=55&Itemid=27 [accessed 25 Oct. 2017].

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to enable and to showcase private happiness as an expression of one's status as a 'good Nazi'; by the same token, it would conspicuously deny the right to private happiness to those deemed politically and racially 'undesirable': the loss of a fulfilling private life would cement their formal exclusion from the *Volksgemeinschaft*.

Many of the findings presented in this book were developed as part of a collaborative research project on the private under National Socialism ('Das Private im Nationalsozialismus') begun in 2013, which was led by the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History Munich – Berlin, in collaboration with historians at the University of Nottingham, and funded by the Leibniz Foundation.¹² The project set out to test the hypothesis that dictatorship and war made private life and pleasures all the more prized, and that the regime knowingly channelled and manipulated Germans' aspirations to a 'normal private life', even as it destroyed, for millions, the chances of achieving it. Indeed, by holding out the prospect of private life as a privilege for those deemed politically worthy and racially acceptable, the regime underscored its promise of integration into a newly cohesive national community. The project also addressed the destruction of the private lives of excluded groups: critics and opponents of the regime and victims of antisemitic persecution. We have examined the consequences of Nazi rule for courtroom battles over the private sphere of the German *Volksgenossen*, the ideas and practices relating to soldiers' home leave in the Second World War, and the way in which the Jewish inmates of ghettos in Nazi-occupied Poland sought to defend their remnants of privacy as a last remaining psychological lifeline.¹³ In this volume, the results of our research are placed alongside other new research on related issues, which we brought into a dialogue at an international conference in Nottingham in 2016.

Defining the Private

The private is not a neutral analytical concept. How we understand its role under National Socialism is deeply embedded in how we define the private, which is itself a political question. Some scholars have seen the

¹² See www.ifz-muenchen.de/no_cache/aktuelles/themen/das-private-im-nationalsozialismus/print/ja/print.html [accessed 25 Oct. 2017].

¹³ See Annemone Christians, 'Das Private vor Gericht: Verhandlungen des Eigenen im Zivil- und Strafrecht 1933–1945' (manuscript, publication forthcoming 2020); Christian Packheiser, 'Heimaturlaub: Soldaten zwischen Front, Familie und NS-Regime' (PhD, Munich, 2018, publication forthcoming 2020); Carlos A. Haas, 'Das Private im Getto: Transformationen jüdischen privaten Lebens in den Gettos von Warschau, Litzmannstadt, Tomaszów und Petrikau 1939 bis 1944' (PhD, Munich, 2018, publication forthcoming 2020).

private as a realm under threat from intrusions by modern states, enabled by new technologies. As early as 1890, Harvard law professors Louis Brandeis and Samuel Warren defended the ‘right to be left alone’, an intervention occasioned by concern over camera technology and the new press photography with its potential to capture people’s images without their permission.¹⁴ Other scholars, meanwhile, have been wary of the way in which the private itself has ‘colonised’ other spaces, and diagnosed a tendency to judge even that which ought to be properly public by the values, affects and emotions associated with private life and identity; thus, for Richard Sennett, in the course of the twentieth century the private became a substitute for the political, which undermined the proper functioning of a public sphere.¹⁵ Underpinning such seemingly contradictory concerns are different definitions of the private itself. What is clear is that these are themselves a product of history. Even the most universal claims of what constitutes an appropriate division of the private and the public spheres are rooted in particular historical conditions. The private is not so much an a priori feature of human life which is then manipulated, appropriated or destroyed by political power; instead, the private itself is the product of historically specific imaginaries and forms of power. This is also clear from interdisciplinary work on the private and privacy, which shows how contemporary understandings of and concerns about privacy have been provoked by new forms of state surveillance and the risk of exposure through social media.¹⁶ That is not to say that private life is not marked by certain traits that occur across chronological and cultural divides. Anthropologists have identified beliefs and practices concerning solitude, seclusion and disclosure in relation to bodily and personal habits, intimacy and family life that appear in many different cultures and periods.¹⁷ Historical scholarship, however, has suggested that the *concept* of the private as a distinct sphere of human activity and the formation of selfhood, which is set in opposition to public life and identities, is rooted

¹⁴ See Daniel Solove, *Understanding Privacy* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 15–18; Helen Nissenbaum, *Privacy in Context: Technology, Policy and the Integrity of Social Life* (Stanford, CA, 2010), 19.

¹⁵ See Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York, NY, 1977).

¹⁶ For examples of recent literature, see Beate Rössler and Dorota Mokrosinska (eds.), *Social Dimensions of Privacy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Cambridge, 2015); Sandra Seubert and Peter Niesen (eds.), *Die Grenzen des Privaten* (Baden-Baden, 2010); Karin Jurczyk and Mechthild Oechsle (eds.), *Das Private neu denken: Erosionen, Ambivalenzen, Leistungen* (Münster, 2008); Nissenbaum, *Privacy in Context*; Solove, *Understanding Privacy*.

¹⁷ See Jean Bethke Elshtain, ‘The Displacement of Politics’, in Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar (eds.), *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy* (Chicago, IL, London, 1997), 166–81, here 168–70; Solove, *Understanding Privacy*, 50, 53–4, 66.

in distinctive historical traditions, notably the Enlightenment challenge to autocracy, and liberal notions of citizenship that emerged in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ In this political tradition, a polity that is based on political participation is imaged as rooted in a conceptual distinction between a realm of ‘the public’, characterised by open political debate outside the organs associated with executive power, which is clearly separated from the private sphere.

An implied juxtaposition between this ideal typical liberal distinction between the private and public realms and its alleged antithesis in twentieth-century ‘totalitarian’ regimes, which respected no separation of private and public identities, has long shaped the way historians have approached the history of the private under National Socialism. Yet before we analyse such interpretations, it is important to recall that the liberal conception of the private was itself deeply embedded in the exercise of power. In insisting on the distinction between the proper scope of state authority and a private sphere, liberals portrayed the private as the repository of positive and politically relevant human qualities. Within it, individuals – historically assumed to be men – were thought to develop their personalities and to nurture the human qualities and values that enabled them to act as mature citizens in a revitalised public sphere.¹⁹ Expectations and norms concerning the private – both as a protected refuge from the outside world and as a site of personal fulfilment and self-cultivation²⁰ – evolved in close correlation with the new forms of political authority that were based around notions of ‘expertise’, and that were exercised by a broadly urban bourgeoisie.²¹ Such ideas of authority were predicated on the notion of disinterested knowledge and judgement exercised by rational, self-determined, deliberating individuals, who had cultivated such virtues in a private capacity. Valverde suggested that the notion of liberal rule was based on a conception of self-rule and ‘intellectual maturity’, which she traces from its Enlightenment origins, particularly the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, to twentieth-century formulations of democratic citizenship in a rational public sphere, as articulated, for instance, by Jürgen Habermas. For Valverde, ‘liberal governance [...] is constituted by a binary opposition between nature and freedom, passion and reason, that continually reproduces despotism

¹⁸ See Jeff Weintraub, ‘The Theory and Politics of the Public/Private Distinction’, in Weintraub/Kumar (eds.), *Public and Private*, 1–42, here 1–2.

¹⁹ See Raymond Geuss, *Public Goods, Private Goods* (Princeton, NJ, 2001), 1–4; Maiken Umbach, *German Cities and Bourgeois Modernism, 1890–1924* (Oxford, 2009), 6, 23.

²⁰ See Krishan Kumar and Ekaterine Makarova, ‘The Portable Home: The Domestication of Public Space’, in Jurczyk/Oechsle (eds.), *Das Private neu denken*, 70–3.

²¹ See Umbach, *German Cities and Bourgeois Modernism*.

within rational autonomous self-rule'.²² It also offers an object lesson in the patriarchal quality of liberalism, where the private sphere was based on the supposedly natural subordination of women to men, who were deemed less capable of rational deliberation.²³ It is therefore perhaps less surprising than it appears at first glance that, in our first snapshot, Elisabeth would draw on an explicitly anti-liberal political ideology to challenge conventional limitations of her right to full personal autonomy.

Liberal definitions of the private were not, of course, homogenous. The boundaries between 'public' and 'private' in broadly liberal societies have been drawn in very different ways, and both terms acquired multiple and overlapping meanings in the process. The contrast between public and private may commonly function to demarcate 'public life' – broadly encompassing government, the economy and the associational life of civil society – from the 'private', denoting the realm of the individual, the family, domestic life and friendship networks. But it can also distinguish the public sector as the realm of governance and collective interests from the private sector, based on the market and on particular interests; or mark the difference between public law (relating to government actors and institutions) and private law (resolving disputes between individuals or private institutions such as corporations).²⁴ Broadly, the public/private distinction differentiates the public as that which pertains to the state or society in general from particular interests and property ownership, the 'closed circles' within society and the personal matters that are classed as private. But no single and straightforward cleavage exists: there is 'no single clear distinction between public and private but rather a series of overlapping contrasts'²⁵ or 'a family of oppositions'.²⁶

The related notion of privacy too has been much contested. Sociologists, political scientists and legal scholars have suggested that legal norms safeguarding the legitimately 'private' in modern liberal societies are required to protect individuals from interference from the state and from third parties. In this view, individuals ought to have control over personal information and communication and to be allowed a degree of physical and psychological seclusion, and freedom from unwanted attention.²⁷ This notion of personal seclusion applies within the home but also in public spaces, for example, in the expectation that one can

²² Mariana Valverde, 'Despotism and Ethical Liberal Governance', *Economy and Society* 25/3 (1996), 357–72, quote 326.

²³ See Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory* (Stanford, CA, 1990), 118–40, esp. 121.

²⁴ See Nissenbaum, *Privacy in Context*, 90. ²⁵ Geuss, *Public Goods*, 6.

²⁶ Weintraub, 'The Theory and Politics of the Public/Private Distinction', 3.

²⁷ See Beate Rössler, *Der Wert des Privaten* (Frankfurt a.M., 2001).

walk down a street without being pestered.²⁸ Privacy may thus be defined in terms of a claim, or even a right, to limit and control access to personal information, property, space and time, where these things are vital to an individual's sense of security and integrity. But claims to privacy can also relate to individual autonomy, dignity and capacity for self-expression, for instance the power to make decisions ('decisional privacy') about personal preferences, leisure and consumption, and in relation to one's own body, intimate relationships, sexuality and reproduction.²⁹ Those who advocate legal claims to privacy present such entitlements as being of general value: society thrives if individuals feel that their innermost thoughts and personal affairs are secure from the intrusion of others.³⁰ But again, the seemingly universal language of such claims is deceptive. In practice, the right to privacy has often cemented existing power relations. In this sense, privacy in Western societies can be seen as a 'privileged condition of freedom and control'.³¹ As already noted, the private realm could shield patriarchal domination: as Catherine McKinnon provocatively put it, privacy can mean the right of men 'to be let alone to oppress women one at a time'.³² The idea of a right to privacy has also been used to preserve bourgeois dominance over other social groups, unable or unschooled in the 'proper' exercise of privacy. One tangible result of this was a social stratification of urban space based on 'proper' and 'improper' practices of private life, and the associated question of sensory order and disorder. Thus, Otter suggests that the 'liberal city' consists of different spatial configurations that correspond to a hierarchy of different sensory perceptions.³³ For emerging liberal elites, the senses of proximity, such as smell and touch, which interfered with the proper exercise of privacy, were replaced by a new discipline with which 'the respectable mastered their passions in public spaces conducive to the exercise of clear, controlled perception: wide streets, squares and parks.

²⁸ See Solove, *Understanding Privacy*, 18–24; Nissenbaum, *Privacy in Context*, 67–71; Anita Allen, 'Privacy', in Alison M. Jaggar and Iris Marion Young (eds.), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford, 1998), 456–65, here 459.

²⁹ See Allen, 'Privacy', 460; Solove, *Understanding Privacy*, 24–34; Nissenbaum, *Privacy in Context*, 81–5. There are disagreements over this dimension of the definition: Wacks disagrees with what he calls the 'promiscuous extension of privacy to [...] so-called "decisional" issues and its conflation with freedom and autonomy'; see Raymond Wacks, *Privacy: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 2015), xiv.

³⁰ See Nissenbaum, *Privacy in Context*, 85–7.

³¹ Patricia Meyer-Spacks, *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self* (Chicago, IL, 2003), 1.

³² McKinnon cited in Solove, *Understanding Privacy*, 82.

³³ See Chris Otter, 'Making Liberalism Durable: Vision and Civility in the Late Victorian City', *Social History* 27/1 (2002), 1–15.