

Introduction

When Lina E., a maid, gave birth to her daughter Martha in 1922, the man she identified as the father denied paternity, and Lina began motherhood without any financial support. When Langenholzhausen city authorities discovered that Lina was virtually penniless, Martha's guardian took the case to court, whereupon the court ordered August K., a bricklayer, to pay child support. For sixteen years, the court, together with the youth department and Martha's state-appointed guardian, ensured that August paid and that Lina and Martha received economic assistance.¹

At a Mother's Day celebration in Detmold, Frau Brielmann received the bronze Honorary Cross for German Mothers. Her award, the highest honor given to women under National Socialism, came after a close investigation of her mothering skills, her racial background, and her family's "worthiness." During the meal that followed the distribution of the crosses, Frau Brielmann told the women at her table, "They should have given me the means to stop bearing children instead of the award." Local Nazi authorities, offended by this remark, began an investigation seeking grounds to revoke Frau Brielmann's Honorary Cross.²

Herr Neske, a soldier, returned from the Russian front to discover that his exhausted wife had been strained to the limits caring for their two young daughters in war-torn Detmold. He turned to the local National Socialist authorities for help. Not long thereafter, Frau Neske spent six weeks in a resort on the North Sea coast at the state's expense, while the local Nazi women's organization made sure her children were cared for.³

1 Staatsarchiv Detmold (StaD), D23 Hohenhausen, 523.

2 Applications for Mother Crosses, StaD, L80 IC, Gruppe 24, Fach 11, 40a.

3 Frau Neske, interview. All personal names of individuals not in public positions have been changed to protect the identity of the speakers.

These three women, each with a different story and a different social situation, all reaped the benefits of German state officials' desire to support families. Their distinct experiences reflect the ambiguity associated with the politically, economically, and ideologically driven transformation of the relationship between the German state and families as the Weimar era gave way to the National Socialist era between the years 1918 and 1945. The almost unanimous belief of state leaders and Germans from all walks of life that the German family faced profound troubles induced concern and action at the national and local levels. Only by reinvigorating the family, Germans believed, could they restore their embattled nation. Heightened concern for the family prompted government officials to develop an array of programs that offered women and children education, financial support, and medical aid. At the same time, families felt their privacy threatened as state policy empowered ever more legal, medical, welfare, and educational authorities to intervene directly and indirectly into family life.

Lina E., the maid, entered the court system – and the youth department's jurisdiction – during the period of the Weimar Republic (1918–1932), Germany's first democracy, which was spawned by the revolution at the end of the First World War. In 1918, reeling from the war and the subsequent revolution, Germans faced not only high mortality rates but also hunger, the destruction of physical property, and a deep sense of loss. The cataclysmic demographic, political, economic, and cultural shifts associated with modernization altered people's understanding of the world in which they lived and exacerbated their feelings of insecurity. The "rationalization" and mechanization of industry restructured the labor force. Mass consumption and mass media drew Germans together across class lines as never before, even as income differences persisted and deepened. Gender roles were acutely disrupted by the so-called New Woman who stepped out of the confines of domesticity, rejecting patriarchal authority and prewar morality. In the face of these changes, German lawmakers made strengthening German families central to their project of rebuilding postwar Germany. Despite deep ideological divisions that influenced the way lawmakers understood the problems threatening families, they all shared a strong commitment to the provision of state services to families. Even through the cycles of inflation and depression that devastated the German economy between 1918 and 1932, legislators struggled to shore up families. For Lina and her daughter Martha, the state's interest in families took the form of a court-appointed guardian whose responsibility it was to ensure that she received child support from Martha's biological father.

Frau Brielmann received her Mother Cross at a time when the Nazi leadership had silenced the political cacophony of Weimar's parliamentary democracy and replaced it with an ideologically driven family policy that had race at its center. The racist thinking intrinsic to Nazism had important implications for family policy. Nazi leaders believed that the "degeneration" of the German *Volk* had its roots in a deadly combination of foreign influences, including communism, feminism, modernism, and, above all, racial mixing. Consequently, Hitler sought to return Germany to its previous glory by instituting a forceful racial policy designed to strengthen the *Volk*. In contrast to Weimar lawmakers, who struggled to balance the liberal commitment to the privacy and sanctity of families with a countervailing willingness to deploy the state's interventionist potential, Nazi policymakers explicitly and unreservedly elevated the state's purported needs above those of the individual, profoundly altering the relationship between the state and families. Pronatalism assumed a new, more aggressive form as Nazi policy enrolled myriad professionals – including physicians, judges, social workers, teachers, welfare and youth department employees, mayors, and party members – in the project of policing families.

During the Second World War, Nazi family policy, like other aspects of the Nazi project, was altered to accommodate wartime exigencies. Nazi leaders found that wartime reality conflicted with their efforts to fulfill their racial and pronatalist aims. Their struggle to raise (or even sustain) the birthrate and to keep morale high conflicted with a daily reality in which more and more men were called away to serve in the military and domestic living conditions worsened. Frau Neske's resort vacation resulted from the wartime shift in policy. Although she had only two children (prior to the war, the prerequisite had been four), the local National Socialist authorities felt that the peace of mind of her soldier husband should take precedence over the strict enforcement of pronatalist and racial guidelines. They therefore granted Frau Neske a recuperative holiday despite her small family and without the requisite health examination. Throughout the war, policymakers explicitly revised programs in this way in order to counter flagging morale – or were forced to do so when the war made adaptation unavoidable.

Just as economic and political circumstances affected family policy in the Weimar and Nazi periods, local implementation, too, changed the character and effects of family policy in Germany. Examining the implementation of family policy at the local level reveals that during both the Weimar and Nazi eras, people at every level collaborated with, rebelled against, and maneuvered around the state's dictates regarding families. When women found state programs personally beneficial, they often served as willing allies

in supporting and promoting them. When they perceived state policies to be against their interests, however, they were quite capable of challenging, evading, or otherwise manipulating them for their own personal benefit, and in so doing they frequently undermined policy aims. Women were often persistent in their demands that state officials accommodate their needs. Some, like Frau Brielmann, publicly challenged the fundamental goals of policy. Others, like Frau Neske, reaped the benefits of expanding state policy.

Moreover, families and bureaucrats at all levels engaged with each other. Even as science promulgated a clearer definition of good parenting, Weimar welfare and youth department authorities sometimes hesitated to use this definition to intervene in family matters. Whereas some doctors enthusiastically endorsed Nazi racial policy before it became codified in law, others failed to comply even after the law had been enacted. During both the Weimar and Nazi eras, the interplay among policymakers, local authorities, and German families had a moderating impact on family policy and in particular tempered the radical transformation of the family the National Socialists sought to effect after 1933.

WEIMAR GERMANY AND FAMILY UPHEAVAL

Founded amid the chaos of a lost war, Germany's first parliamentary government set out to reconstruct German society. Politicians on the Left and Right battled over the appropriate course for the future of the country. Because they did not agree on economic, foreign, or domestic policy, they fought over nearly every legislative issue. Yet beneath this disharmony lay a belief shared across the political spectrum that German national restoration depended on the government's supporting and encouraging family life. Wartime conditions had eroded the family as a site of economic provision, security, and stability. The deaths of more than 1.6 million men in the war, permanently disrupted the lives of many German families. The birthrate, which fell to an all-time low of 14 per 1,000 during 1916–1917, failed to return to prewar levels throughout the 1920s. Together with war casualties, the low birthrate induced fears among some Germans that they were dying out as a people (*Volkstod*). Furthermore, the war left in its wake close to 600,000 widows and almost 1.2 million war orphans, whose standard of living deteriorated sharply as they became dependent on limited widows' pensions and their single mothers' meager earnings from low-paid work.⁴ Even more ominous for the future of the nation, 15 percent of men aged

⁴ Bessel, *Germany after the First World War*, 225–7.

twenty to forty had been killed, leaving a “surplus” of over 2 million women whose prospects of marriage were dim.⁵ Even the dramatic upsurge in the marriage rate immediately after the war to 14.5 per thousand in 1920, up from 4.2 per 1,000 in 1915–1916 – a result of both the wartime postponement of marriages and the desire of many men and women to reestablish “home” after the war ended – did not quell widespread fears of societal crisis. This was in part because the divorce rate, which had averaged 24.6 per 100,000 between 1909 and 1913, rose to a record high of 62.9 in 1921. Illegitimacy rates, too, were on the rise, underscoring for many how far societal morality had strayed from prewar standards. As one Christian Conservative delegate to the Prussian *Landtag* (state parliament) put it, the most important task facing the new regime was to heal “the corrosive, nearly incurable ills” that had befallen the German people, which were those “predominantly caused by the fact that our *Volk* no longer has a healthy family life.”⁶

In light of this, it is perhaps not surprising that many Germans, including politicians from all parties, feared that the German family, the only institution they deemed capable of stabilizing and restoring German society, might not be equal to the task without substantial help. In particular, paternal authority, widely viewed as the essential core of families, needed to be shored up. In some families, women had grown restless in their roles as traditional wives and mothers and thus resisted the reestablishment of paternal authority. In others, men fortunate enough to survive the war returned with physical and emotional wounds that prevented them from reasserting themselves as patriarchs. Many Germans associated the absence of paternal authority with rising juvenile crime rates and the proliferation of antisocial youth gangs. Although the claim that the war had destroyed patriarchy is exaggerated, there is no doubt that many families had been shaken to the core.⁷ Reestablishing families and fathers’ place in them thus assumed a position of primary importance in the postwar period. Chief among the perceived obstacles was the matter of women’s work. Of the more than 2 million women who had entered the labor market to boost the war economy, many resisted returning to their domestic roles after 1918.⁸ Returning soldiers complained that women’s continued employment made it more difficult for them to find work and prevented a restoration of the prewar patriarchal family structure.

5 These figures come from the 1925 census and are cited in Grossmann, *Reforming Sex*, 6.

6 Bronisch, *Verhandlungen des Preussischen Landtags* 51, Sitzung 19 September 1919, cols. 4098–4100, quoted in Hong, *Welfare, Modernity*, 56.

7 Domansky, “Militarization and Reproduction.”

8 Women’s employment rose 17 percent between 1914 and 1918. Rouette, “Mothers and Citizens,” 52.

As a result, politicians across the political spectrum envisioned a “peaceful and harmonious society” based on the “patriarchal principle”: soldiers and “women of the war” (*Kriegerfrauen*) would become, respectively, “providers and mothers.”⁹ No one imagined that this process would be easy. As early as 1916, Gustav Stresemann, a delegate for the German People’s Party (Deutsche Volkspartei, DVP) and future Reich chancellor, predicted that the crucial task of removing women from the labor force “could not be carried out without hardship, since the women who have grown accustomed to high wages and independent work [would] naturally not always return to the old circumstances smoothly and voluntarily.” Rather than shy away from the problem, however, he emphasized the importance of tackling this “enormous task.”¹⁰ One year later, Catholic Center Party (Zentrum) member Hans Bell clarified the point by declaring that since returning soldiers could not be expected to tolerate unemployment, women’s “dismissals” were “the law of the hour.”¹¹ In March 1919, a demobilization bill was decreed that called for the removal of women from veterans’ jobs. Even the Social Democrats (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland, SPD), whose prewar program had touted employment as the road to women’s emancipation, abandoned their platform in light of returning soldiers’ need for jobs.¹² Only a small group of six female legislators from four different parties protested the hardship that demobilization would cause working women.¹³

While government-organized demobilization committees worked to reintegrate returning soldiers into the labor market and relegate women to the home, Reichstag politicians set out to create policy that would ameliorate the social chaos of postwar German society. They tried to shore up families by enshrining in the constitution the preservation of marriage and “the maintenance of the purity and health of family, and public support for the family” (Art. 119).¹⁴ Despite unanimous agreement that the state had a responsibility to protect and strengthen families, great disparities existed in the way politicians conceptualized the family itself, the problems facing families, and the appropriate role for the state. At the heart of the matter lay a fundamental disagreement about what caused families’ distress: theories ranged from women’s rejection of domesticity and the war to industrialization, rising immorality, and the decreasing influence of the church.

9 Rouette, *Sozialpolitik als Geschlechterpolitik*, 41.

10 Zeller, “Demobilmachung und Geschlechtspezifische Arbeitsteilung,” 282.

11 Ibid.

12 Sneeringer, *Winning Women’s Votes*, 67.

13 The women came from the DNVP, Center, DVP, and SPD parties. Ibid., 28.

14 Quoted in Peukert, *Weimar Republic*, 131.

Nor did politicians hold a monopoly on explanations of what troubled families. Throughout the Weimar era, myriad interest groups, from feminists to morality leagues, entered the debates, sometimes siding with specific political parties and at other times straddling political lines in support of specific platforms. Because each interpretation of what troubled the family reflected a particular vision of Germany, debates over many legislative proposals were characterized by bitter conflict. Attempts to formulate and implement family policy during the Weimar era failed repeatedly for lack of consensus on what to do about benefits for large families, contraception, abortion, counseling for engaged couples, and a variety of other issues.

At the crux of many family policy disagreements lay the question of proper gender roles. Members of the right-wing German National People's Party (Deutschnationale Volkspartei, DNVP) believed that the high mortality rate during the war, the low birthrate, and what they saw as the spread of immorality at all levels of society undermined national rejuvenation and threatened the German race. They asserted that German women's refusal to fulfill their "biologically destined" role as mothers – in conjunction with men's failure to establish themselves as patriarchs – posed a dire threat to German society. The DNVP rejected arguments about the benefits of modernity and supported a return to more traditional gender roles.¹⁵ Catholic Center Party delegates also attributed the modernist struggle for women's rights to pure egoism and called for women to "apply maternal self-sacrifice to the wounds of war and arrest the moral decline stemming from blockade and revolution."¹⁶ Together, the DNVP and Center Party supported legislation to increase penalties for abortion and prostitution, forbid contraception, and restrict the accessibility of divorce.

This legislation was strongly opposed by the liberal parties. Following lines developed for the middle-class women's movement before the war, the German People's Party and the German Democratic Party (Deutsche Demokratische Partei, DDP) maintained that the stability of the nation depended on women's active political participation and called for equal wages for women. Members of these parties argued that although women and men had interests and needs that were fundamentally different, the sexes were nonetheless to be regarded as equal in value. Consistent with these views of gender complementarity, they argued that women should limit themselves "to female work" where their "motherly 'essence' could blossom." Employment in nursing, teaching, and social work, for example, enabled women to practice and teach motherliness and domesticity. A 1928

15 Osborne, *Politics of the Body*, 34.

16 Sneeringer, *Winning Women's Votes*, 37.

DVP flyer emphasized that “the model woman served *Volk* and fatherland by bringing the values she personified in the home – silent devotion and selfless love – to the public.”¹⁷ Liberal politicians agreed with their right-wing counterparts that not all modern influences on women were good. Although the DVP and DDP fought for sexual equality before the law and in education, they worried that divorce reform and legal abortion would discourage women from becoming mothers.

In their own legislative proposals, Social Democratic Party delegates rejected arguments about faltering morality, asserting instead that the disruption of families and the falling birthrate stemmed primarily from the social upheaval caused by war and the bitter hardships that industrialization caused the working classes. Although Socialists, too, believed that motherhood constituted women’s highest calling, they championed women’s equality, fought for better wages for women, and forced a women’s suffrage bill through parliament. They believed that by supporting mothers and infants, providing adequate housing, and improving health care for all Germans, the state could ameliorate the stark class divisions that plagued German society, giving women the strength and confidence to choose motherhood. Though the SPD’s pronatalist message resembled that of more conservative parties, its consistent support of women’s equality and voluntary motherhood was fundamentally different.

On the far left, the Communist Party (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, KPD) was alone in rejecting the idea that a woman’s natural role was that of wife and mother. Communist delegates consistently argued for women’s right to work and to earn higher wages, both of which they considered essential to strengthening families. They scorned the traditional household, which they saw as a bourgeois institution, and advocated instead collective kitchens and day care to free women from domestic burdens. They also – in theory at least – opposed the double burden on many women to work both outside and inside the home, since it prevented women’s active political participation as comrades. The KPD, more than any other party, championed the revision of the laws limiting access to contraception and banning abortion.

Working within these political parties, women shared their own opinions about gender roles. Beginning with their forceful protest of the extreme hardship caused by the Demobilization Acts, they asserted their presence on the political landscape. Though an increasing number of women were elected to the Reichstag, they did not always agree among themselves about

17 Ibid., 137.

what best reflected women's interests. Women on the right and center, who saw motherhood, not employment, as women's proper role, did not support the radical demands of their Socialist and Communist sisters for improved working conditions and equal pay. On some issues, however, especially those that dealt with maternal and child protection, female delegates did tend to work together across party lines.¹⁸

Women's organizations also actively organized to strengthen German families and society. On the right, members of the Federal Organization of Protestant Women's Groups (Vereinigung Evangelischer Frauenverbände) disapproved of all suspected modern influences on gender, scorned women's suffrage because it forced women into roles inappropriate to their "life calling," and even attacked the act of voting, which they believed exacerbated the blurring of women's and men's roles. These Protestant women also resisted any reform of divorce or liberalization of abortion that would sully "the dignity and honor of women" (*die Würde und Ehre der Frauen*).¹⁹ In the Federation of German Women's Organizations (Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine, BDF), an umbrella organization of women's groups, women sought to unite across political parties in the name of "organized motherhood." Their 1919 program declared that "The purity of family life is . . . the basic condition of social health and national fitness."²⁰ The women of the BDF believed they could conquer the immoral influences within society – prostitution, pornography, abortion, and venereal disease – even as they resisted both the birth control movement and the eugenic movement that justified it.²¹ By the 1920s, however, the BDF, whose membership primarily represented an older generation – and its conservative elements at that – spoke for an ever smaller number of women. While the BDF leadership decried the problems created by the New Woman, who supposedly shunned motherhood, many young bourgeois and Social Democratic women acknowledged and even applauded Weimar's independent young women.²² This social, cultural, and generational division influenced women's support of legislative proposals. Whereas older women argued that married mothers should be banned from factory work so that they could care for their children, young women more often advocated the establishment of day care. The older generation opposed young women who sought support from the numerous other organizations that fought for women's education, access to birth control, and elective

18 See Stoehr, "Housework and Motherhood," 228.

19 Kaufmann, "Die Begründung und Politik," 384.

20 Evans, *Feminist Movement*, 236.

21 Ann Taylor Allen, "Feminism and Eugenics," 491–2.

22 See Osborne, "New Woman."

motherhood. Doctors, health experts, feminists, and members of the international birth control league, which was politically allied with the SPD and KPD, brought new perspectives to bear on questions of reproduction and motherhood. Sex reformers established birth control and sex advice counseling centers “that took as their motto ‘better to prevent than to abort.’”²³ The League for the Protection of Motherhood and Family Hygiene (Liga für Mutterschutz und Familien Hygiene) worked to provide working-class women with more control over motherhood and to improve health conditions for both mothers and children.

Policy formulation in the Weimar Republic was impeded not only by disagreements over appropriate gender roles but also by disagreements over the state’s right to intervene in families. As the application of science, medicine, and technology to social policy expanded the potential for state intervention, Social Democrats and Communists eagerly advocated applying this new knowledge. They envisioned a comprehensive social welfare program that went well beyond providing material support and involved intervention “in all aspects of family life including health, sexuality, child-rearing, and education to help create an ‘orderly family.’”²⁴ These politicians on the Left believed that reviving German society depended on monitoring families in their everyday lives, and they were willing to grant state agents from the welfare and youth departments greater access to families even before clear signs of trouble had developed. In contrast, many conservative politicians and religious leaders worried that intensive intervention would ultimately destroy the very families it sought to help. They feared that the generous state benefits advocated by Socialists and Communists would make families dependent on the state and erode the masculine independence so critical to notions of citizenship. They contended that state intervention in the family, even in the name of child welfare, threatened a father’s authority over his children and diminished parental responsibility. The Christian welfare organizations – the Catholic Caritas and the Protestant Inner Mission – also opposed such “godless” and “worldly socialist influences” (*weltlich sozialistische Einflüsse*) in families, arguing that “civil society had the duty to protect and foster the family, but by no means [the right] to absorb it and the individual, or to substitute itself for them.”²⁵

Because individual families tended to avoid state-sponsored efforts at social discipline even when they were designed with an eye to social benefit,

23 Grossmann, *Reforming Sex*, 15.

24 Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, 110.

25 Crew, “Eine Elternschaft zu Dritt,” 269; Hong, *Welfare, Modernity*, 82.