

Christian Complicity and the Holocaust

In "Soviet Women" (Vol. 10, No. 4) there is a brief review of Claudia Koonz's *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics*.

I am not going to run out and buy the book before I respond to the review, because I have a few dozen other things to do today. But I am angry, and I think such anger needs to be expressed because it can help us all to understand women's diversity, to listen to each other's anger, at times.

When I read in Louise Mahood's review, "Christian women did not so much undermine Nazi rule, as keep a distance from it" (p. 109), I am shocked. If we consider the everyday lives of Christian women under Nazi rule, we know that most of them suffered great repression. We also know, given the age-old anti-Semitism in the German culture, and the powerful agitation/propaganda of the Nazi machine that many of these women were in fact quite racist. If they were quiet during the Nazi years, their passivity would have come both from fear of repercussions, and from a general agreement with the racist ideology of the time. They were not "distant" from Nazi rule, but fully integrated into it, on the level of daily practice. They watched Jewish — and other — neighbours disappear; they worked in the concentration camps, etc., etc. Can it be true that only a few wives of the SS participated in "recycling Jewish property" (p. 109)? Even TV versions of this period, which somehow ring true, demonstrate the nonsense of the above comment. To whom do we suppose the jewelry and the nice clothing of wealthier Jews (Yes! There were lots of poor Jews, too!) went, if not to the wives of Nazis? To whom did the food, the alcohol (perhaps intended as bribes, to save a life) go, if not to the the Nazi woman, the manager of the household? Whose hands were bloodied in the process of "recycling Jewish property"?

It is not easy for me to say why such overlooking of the obvious, such failure to deeply consider the daily lives of Jewish mothers, makes me so angry. But it is because I owe a debt to the members of my family who died in the Holocaust.

As feminists trying to look at racism in Canada and in the world, I suggest that we consider questions of complicity from as many angles as possible.

Agi Lukacs, Toronto

Louise Mahood Responds

When Claudia Koonz set out to write *Mothers in the Fatherland*, she sought to answer the question, How did women fare in a system that victimized so many? What role did they play? What value did they have to the system? What access to power?

In the course of her work several facts emerged that required careful attention.

1. Not all German women were Nazis.
2. Not all German women were Christians.
3. Hitler's dream for Nazis was not that it should be Christian, but a "unified secular pagan" religion.

In order for Hitler's plans for Germany to work, he first must convert Christians away from their Christianity, with its tremendous debt to Israel. And so he strove to recreate a native German "volk" religion.

Although he was fanatically dedicated to his vision he was no fool. Where a system of information-sharing and community building was in place, first he co-opted it then he used it (e.g., Protestant Women's Church Groups and structures).

Koonz does this in order to try to answer a question that has deeply troubled feminist historians: How did Hitler manage to co-opt a country of women? The short easy answer is that the women were naturally as anti-Semitic as Hitler was, and we know that it is partly true. Some have tried to exonerate German women by suggesting they did not know what was going on around them. That is also not true.

At no point in her work does Koonz exonerate Christian or any other German women from their complicity in the Third Reich's attempt to destroy Jews, Bolsheviks, Gypsies, Poles, Slavs, homosexuals and the mentally incompetent. What she does do is try to sort through a tremendous amount of previously unexplored data to determine to what extent German women intentionally supported Nazi propaganda or benefited from Nazi policy. Koonz's portrait of German women is multifaceted. There were women who knew what was happening but who were powerless to react because of their "place" in Nazism (in the kitchen, bedroom and nursery). Many more became convinced of the propaganda than actually benefited from it. Wives and families of the armed forces, particularly the SS, gained the most. Jewish fortunes and properties remained in the hands of the few. Then there were those, such as some female members of the confessing church, who actively resisted, at great cost.

All the same, Koonz demonstrates how Hitler's concordat with the Pope and his use of Protestant church structures effectively silenced the majority of German Christian women. Hitler believed what little power women had must be taken away because otherwise he could not guarantee their silence, let alone their cooperation.

Koonz uses the word "distant" to describe German women's proximity to the process of decision making and policy implementation. As "Mothers of the Fatherland" woman's primary function was to bear and nurture little Nazis.

Her task is not to exonerate but to explicate. And she does a remarkable job.

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