

This is the English-language version of a paper I was invited to give at an international conference entitled 'From Voronezh to Stalingrad', sponsored by the Department of Law and Humanities, Voronezh State Agricultural University, the Moscow Military History Institute and the Administration of the Voronezh Region in Russia. The paper was presented on 5 June 2012 in the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, Victory Park, Moscow and on 6 June 2013 at the State Agricultural University in Voronezh. It is being published in Russian in a collection of the conference proceedings edited by Professor Sergey I. Filonenko. I should like to thank Dr Galina Marri for translating the paper into Russian.

Nazi policies on German women during the Second World War – Lessons learned from World War 1?

At the end of his book on the Second World War Antony Beevor tells the story of a German farmer's wife who was arrested in Paris in June 1945. She had illegally boarded a train carrying French workers back from Germany so that she could be reunited with the French prisoner of war who had worked on her farm and with whom she had fallen in love.¹ Beevor uses her as an example of the unforeseen impact the war had on individuals and does not explore how this case can be used to cast light on the Nazis' failure not only to prevent relationships between German women and foreign workers or prisoners of war, but also to impose their racial ideas on all Germans. This paper will examine how the regime dealt with German women's relationships with foreign men, to explore how the Nazis tried and, at times, failed to learn from the experiences on the home front in the First World War. Although it is very clear to see the Nazis' racism in their war-time policies regarding German women's relationships with foreigners, it is remarkable how similar attitudes are among the population at large in the two war periods, and how, in essence, Nazi attempts to inculcate their racist beliefs in all the German people failed.

It is a commonplace that the Nazis were keen to avoid the perceived mistakes on the home front in the First World War. Although the 'stab-in-the-back' legend, the belief that

the German army had been betrayed by politicians, socialists and pacifists on the home front, is a myth, some blamed women for the loss of the war. Colonel Max Bauer criticised women's moral failings as they exploited their husbands' absence for sexual excesses, and he claimed that women's total contribution to the war effort was inadequate. Even the leader of the German Protestant Women's League, Paula Mueller-Otfried, criticised women's grumbling letters to soldiers at the front, which undermined soldiers' morale.² War-weariness, lack of morale, exhaustion and hunger pervaded the German home front in 1918. The Nazis, therefore, were determined that these would not reoccur in the Second World War and took several steps to prevent them:

- soldiers' wives were given allowances up to 85% of their husband's previous income, rather than the fixed sums of the First World War, which meant they were not forced to go out to work;³
- plans for rationing were put in place as early as 1937 with rations cards ready for distribution in August 1939; the Nazis also introduced methods to prevent hoarding and to curb the black market and bartering, and the plundering of occupied territories helped ensure adequate food supplies;⁴
- although women aged 17 to 45 had to register for work following a decree of 27 January 1943 in the wake of the Stalingrad debacle, relatively few actually went out to work. This may have been due to Hitler's reluctance to force women out to work, because of his bourgeois beliefs of women's place being in the home or because of his desire not to upset older, non-combat working men who wanted their wives at home, or to women's reluctance to go out to work.⁵ And the necessity for women to go out to work was not as strong as in the First World War, as Germany was dependent on foreign labour.

Some 7.6 million foreigners were working in Germany by August 1944. They included 5.7 million workers, the majority of whom had been conscripted, and 1.9 million prisoners-of-war.⁶ But the presence of these foreigners, particularly foreign men from the East, was to cause the regime concern about the possible contamination of the German race. To help contain this contamination the Nazis insisted that 50 per cent of workers from the East had to be female and they also set up brothels for foreign workers in 1941, staffed by foreign women, in an attempt to meet the sexual needs of foreign workers, so they would not seek sex with German women and also as a reward to encourage them to work harder.⁷ Freund-Widder claims that there were 60 brothels for foreign workers across Germany in 1943, staffed by 600 women who had been brought from Paris, Poland, Bohemia and Moravia, while police reports indicate that Berlin had 28 brothels for foreign workers by 1942.⁸

The Nazis were quick to legislate for interaction between Germans and foreign prisoners of war in November 1939 to try and prevent the 'threat of contamination and pollution' to the German race.⁹ In essence, they wanted to prevent any contact except that deemed strictly necessary between the German people and foreigners, with the threat of imprisonment for the German. With the occupation of Poland the Germans recruited Poles to work in German agriculture and industry and the Nazis were concerned that 'there are many German women and girls who, unmindful of their duty to the *Volk*, are not ashamed to strike up a friendship or even intimate relations with these men of an alien *Volk*. . . . For as long as he remains on our soil the foreign labourer will exploit the woman of German blood to satisfy his sexual cravings, father children with her and later . . . simply abandon the woman along with her half-breed children.'¹⁰ On 8 March 1940 a decree was passed concerning

Polish workers which became the basis for further decrees for other workers from the East. All Polish workers had to wear a badge with the letter 'P' on their clothing, and all social contact with Germans was forbidden. The Poles had their own designated restaurants, bars and cinemas and they were not allowed to use public transport or attend the same church services as Germans.¹¹ The decree also permitted 'special handling' – the death penalty - for those who had sexual intercourse with Germans. A further law of 20 February 1942 confirmed that sexual intercourse between a Russian worker or prisoner of war and a German woman was punishable by his death.¹² But much depended on the nationality of the worker, or prisoner of war. Social contact between Germans and civilian workers from Western Europe was not banned. In the case of Poles, if the authorities deemed that the male worker was worthy of Germanization, no penalty was forthcoming and if the German woman was single, the couple might be allowed to marry.¹³ French or British prisoners-of-war caught in a relationship with a German woman were referred to the military courts and usually sentenced to three years, whereas Russian and Polish prisoners-of-war and workers were handed over to the Gestapo, ending up in concentration camps if they were not executed. Kundrus believes that from 1943 more were sent to concentration camps so the regime could exploit their labour.¹⁴ However, in 1944 two or three Soviet workers were executed daily for forbidden contact with German women, and figures from Hamburg show at least 900 foreign workers, mainly Poles, were executed for forbidden contact during the war.¹⁵

German women found guilty of having sexual intercourse with a foreigner faced a period in a concentration camp. On 31 January 1940 Himmler instructed that German women who had a relationship with a prisoner of war should be sentenced to at least one year in a concentration camp, but because the sentences given to

German women varied across the Reich, the *Sicherheitsdienst* (Security Service, SD) demanded a uniform tariff of three years in 1943.¹⁶ Similar sentences were given to women found guilty of forbidden contact with workers from the East. Elizabeth Heinemann has claimed that some 10,000 German women a year were sent to concentration camps for forbidden contact, the majority (55%) of them married.¹⁷ Himmler was keen to set an example and to deter others. In cases where the Polish worker was hanged for forbidden contact with a German woman, Poles working in the area and the woman concerned were forced to watch the execution or to walk past the hanged man.¹⁸ On 31 January 1940 Himmler also instructed that the German woman should be publicly humiliated before being sent to a concentration camp, and have her hair cut off before being paraded through the local district with a sign telling of her shameful conduct around her neck.¹⁹ In March 1941 a married woman who had an affair with a French prisoner of war had her head shaved and was marched through the town of Bramberg in Lower Franconia carrying 'a sign which said, "I have sullied the honour of the German woman".'²⁰ Himmler also advocated the same punishment in cases where the German woman had been intimate with a Polish worker.²¹ Gellately tells of the case of Dora von Calbitz who in September 1940 was found guilty of having sexual relations with a Pole. She had her head shaved and was placed in the pillory of her town of Oschatz near Leipzig, with a sign that proclaimed, 'I have been a dishonourable German woman in that I sought and had relations with Poles. By doing that I excluded myself from the community of the people.'²²

Public reaction to this humiliation was mixed, with some believing the punishment deserved and even calling for a beating to be added or for the woman to be hanged as well as the Pole.²³ Others rejected it, and protested about the double standard, as

German soldiers could have sexual relations with foreign women with impunity and even in Germany, German men could prey on female foreign workers.²⁴ On 31 October 1941 Hitler forbade any further public punishments; Kundrus believes this was because of the negative publicity such treatment was receiving abroad, but photographs continue to show women wearing signs on display in market squares after this date, but not head shaving.²⁵

But such vilification was not new, nor was the language used. On 14 January 1943 the Reich Ministry of Justice declared that 'German women who engage in sexual relations with prisoners of war have betrayed the front, done gross injury to their nation's honour, and damaged the reputation of German womanhood abroad'.²⁶ During the First World War, one Deputy Commanding General (Stuttgart) wrote in September 1916 that German women who had affairs with prisoners of war 'display an enormous disregard for individual honour and national pride', while others believed that German women's 'scandalous unpatriotic behaviour' was 'tarnishing Germany's reputation abroad'.²⁷ In the first few weeks of the war, German officials were aghast at the welcome foreign prisoners-of-war received from German women, who gave them food, flowers and cigarettes, perhaps out of curiosity as many would not have come into contact with foreigners before. Officials called their behaviour 'base and un-German'.²⁸ Over the course of the war Germany took 2.5 million prisoners-of-war and housed them in over 130 camps across Germany.²⁹ Many were employed in industry and, in particular, in agriculture. The authorities used the Prussian Law of Siege (1851) to ban unnecessary contact between Germans and prisoners-of-war, and thousands of women were brought before the courts, receiving sentences from one week to one year. One woman in Lower Silesia, for example, got six months for exchanging letters with a Russian prisoner-of-war in 1915 while in

1916 in Würzburg an unmarried shop assistant was sent to four months in prison for having an affair with a French prisoner-of-war. In Leipzig in 1917 25 women were charged with treason because of their affairs with prisoners-of-war.³⁰ In another case, in Frankenthal in late 1915, female factory workers attacked some of their colleagues who had been having an affair with French prisoners-of-war. One woman was bedridden for two weeks. The perpetrators were fined only five marks for grievous bodily harm, as the court took into account the fact that they had acted out of 'healthy patriotic feeling'.³¹ Some affairs came to the attention of the authorities when the women became pregnant, or through the use of 'watchmen' appointed to monitor the behaviour of women in some communities who often received denunciations from local residents, just as in the Second World War.³² In some areas women faced not only imprisonment, but also public shaming; they had their names posted on church doors, or broadcast in the press, and in some places women were threatened with being placed in the pillory where passers-by could hurl words of abuse, or even objects, but we have no record of the extent to which this happened.³³

Although the authorities accused women involved with prisoners of war of treason and unpatriotic behaviour, there is some evidence during both wars to show that, particularly in the countryside and especially in Catholic areas, the population did not share these views, over time coming to see the prisoner of war not as an enemy but as a valued worker, whose labour ensured that the farm could continue. Some prisoners of war and foreign labourers actually lived with the farming family and over time became integrated into the community, where the local young men had been called up, and so the foreigners replaced them as targets of young women's attention and affection.³⁴ In his study of Bavaria during the First World War,

Ziemann believes that it was young single women and women whose soldier husbands had either been killed or taken prisoner who pursued relationships with prisoners-of-war.³⁵

During the Second World War, too, it is in the countryside that relationships between German women and foreign workers and prisoners of war flourished, in spite of unrelenting official disapproval. In 1944 the SD had to acknowledge that 'particularly heavy punishments have, unfortunately, not achieved an overwhelmingly successful result'.³⁶ In June 1944 the Bavarian Justice authority complained about the ever-increasing number of relationships between German women and foreign men. In 1942 the SD had noted twice as many cases as in 1941; in Regensburg alone between January and June 1942 257 German women were reported for having a relationship with a prisoner-of war, and 37 for a relationship with a Polish worker.³⁷ There are many reasons that these relationships flourished in the countryside. As in the First World War the prisoner or worker became integrated into the family and was regarded as a valuable worker. Although there is some evidence that Germans initially regarded French and Belgian prisoners of war as equals, and those from the East as inferior, these attitudes were undermined when they got to know workers and prisoners from the East. They came to respect them for their hard work and, also, in many cases, their shared religious values. The Catholic Church encouraged its flock to regard all humans as equal.³⁸ Herbert claims that Nazi calls to 'protect German blood ... found no echo in existing popular prejudice'.³⁹ Jill Stephenson writes of a Nazi women's district leader, married to a staunch Nazi, who looked after her Polish worker, pregnant with her son's baby, and then also cared for the child when it was born in February 1945.⁴⁰

In both world wars, German women entered relationships with foreign prisoners of war for a number of reasons. In the countryside women left in charge of the farm were keen not to lose their labour and might also have been intimidated into a relationship, or have felt a genuine attraction.⁴¹ During both wars the authorities continued to view the liaisons as, at the very least, unpatriotic, but during the Third Reich they were also seen as a threat to the German race. During the First World War, the harshness of the penalties imposed on women entering relationships with prisoners of war did not depend on the nationality of the prisoner, but during the Second World War the ethnicity of the prisoner of war or foreign labourer was paramount. Local communities, however, saw beyond the foreigner's nationality and came to see the individual foreigners as fellow human beings, not as the enemy, nor as racial inferiors or polluters.

Notes

1. A. Beevor, *The Second World War* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2012), pp. 782-3. Her husband was a soldier on the Russian front.
2. A. Süchting-Hänger, *Das "Gewissen der Nation". Nationales Engagement und politisches Handeln konservativer Frauenorganisationen 1900 bis 1937* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2002), p. 234.
3. J. Noakes, *Nazism 1919-1945. Vol. 4. The German Home Front in World War II* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1998), pp. 314-15.
4. Noakes, *Nazism*, pp. 510-11, 521-2. For the plundering of occupied lands see A. Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction. The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Allen Lane, 2006) and M. Mazower, *Hitler's Empire. Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), pp. 259-93.

5. M. Stibbe, *Women in the Third Reich* (London: Hodder, 2003), pp. 94-5; R. J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War 1939-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), pp. 358-61.
6. U. Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers. Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany under the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 297-8. The largest number came from the Soviet Union (2,126,753 civilian workers and 631,559 prisoners of war), followed by Poland (1,659,764 civilians and 28,316 prisoners of war), whereas the numbers of French civilian workers and prisoners of war were similar: 654,782 and 599,967 respectively.
7. U. Herbert, 'Labor as Spoils of Conquest, 1933-1945', in D. Crew (ed.), *Nazism and German Society 1933-1945* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 248; B. Kundrus, 'Forbidden Company: Romantic Relationships between Germans and Foreigners, 1939 to 1945', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 11: 1/2 (2002), p. 217.
8. Freund-Widder claims that Hitler ordered the opening of brothels in areas with foreign workers in September 1939: M. Freund –Widder, *Frauen unter Kontrolle. Prostitution und ihre staatliche Bekämpfung in Hamburg vom Ende des Kaiserreichs bis zu den Anfängen der Bundesrepublik* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2003), p. 176; A. F. Timm, 'Sex with a Purpose: Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and Militarized Masculinity in the Third Reich', in D. Herzog (ed.), *Sexuality and German Fascism* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2005), pp. 247-8.
9. Kundrus, 'Forbidden Company', pp. 201, 208.
10. Quoted in Kundrus, 'Forbidden Company', p. 206.
11. R. Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society. Enforcing Racial Policy 1933-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 223, 232-3.
12. Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, p. 355.
13. Kundrus claims that this policy began in 1942: Kundrus, 'Forbidden Company', p. 215; Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society*, pp. 234-5. E. D Heineman, *What*

- Difference does a Husband Make? Women and Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 58-9.
14. Kundrus, 'Forbidden Company', pp. 213, 215.
 15. Heineman, *What Difference does a Husband Make?*, p. 59; Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society*, p. 236.
 16. Noakes, *Nazism*, p. 385; Kundrus, 'Forbidden Company', p. 212.
 17. Heineman, *What Difference does a Husband Make?*, p. 78.
 18. There are several examples in Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society*, pp. 240-1 and R. Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 175-6.
 19. Noakes, *Nazism*, p. 385.
 20. Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society*, pp. 238-9.
 21. Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers*, p. 76.
 22. Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society*, p. 236.
 23. Gellately, *Backing Hitler*, pp. 179-80.
 24. Kundrus, 'Forbidden Contact', pp. 210, 215. Gellately has several cases of German men preying on their Polish workers: Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society*, pp. 233-4.
 25. Kundrus, 'Forbidden Contact', p. 210.
 26. Quoted in Kundrus, 'Forbidden Contact', p. 205.
 27. L. M. Todd, "'The Soldier's Wife who ran away with the Russian': Sexual Infidelities in World War I Germany', *Central European History*, 44 (2011), pp. 261-2.
 28. L. M. Todd, 'Sexual Treason: State Surveillance of Immorality and Infidelity in World War One Germany' (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 2005), pp. 139-42; J. Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914. Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 80-2.
 29. Todd, "'The Soldier's Wife'", p. 262.
 30. Todd, 'Sexual Treason', pp. 150-2.

31. Report in *Tempelhofer Zeitung*, 25 January 1916 cited in S. Hering, *Die Kriegsgewinnlerinnen. Praxis und Ideologie der deutschen Frauenbewegung im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus, 1990), p. 38.
32. Todd, "The Soldier's Wife", pp. 266-7. For denunciations of women having affairs with foreigners in the Second World War see Gellately, *Backing Hitler*, pp. 172-5.
33. Todd, 'Sexual Treason', pp. 157, 163; B. Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany 1914-1923* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), p. 165; R. Chickering, *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany. Freiburg, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 356-7.
34. Todd, "The Soldier's Wife", pp. 275-6. Jill Stephenson notes that 'foreign workers became the focus of sexual interest for German women': J. Stephenson, 'Triangle: Foreign Workers, German Civilians, and the Nazi Regime. War and Society in Württemberg, 1939-45', *German Studies Review*, 15 (1992), p. 344. For the integration of foreign workers in Württemberg see J. Stephenson, *Hitler's Home Front. Württemberg under the Nazis* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), pp. 276-86.
35. Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany*, p. 164.
36. Quoted in Gellately, *Backing Hitler*, p. 180.
37. Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society*, p. 240.
38. Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society*, pp. 239-40.
39. Quoted in Kundrus, 'Forbidden Contact', p. 221.
40. Stephenson, *Hitler's Home Front*, p. 286.
41. It was believed that some women claimed they had been coerced into a relationship to avoid harsh punishment: Stephenson, *Hitler's Home Front*, p. 280; Gellately, *Backing Hitler*, p. 171.