

Sexual Freedom under Nazism

by Élisabeth Goudin

The Nazi regime encouraged Germans to indulge in playful heterosexual activity. Many "Aryan" women were given an opportunity to develop professionally and emotionally. Was there a contradiction between promoting people's sexual freedom while depriving them of political freedom?

Reviewed: Elissa Mailänder, *Amour, mariage, sexualité. Une histoire intime du nazisme (1930-1950)*, Paris, Seuil, 2021. 512 pp., €24.

The link between Nazism and sexuality is not a new field of research. Much has been written on Goebbels' sex addiction, Himmler's extremely crude letters to his mistress, and whether Hitler had a micropenis. However, all the projects that focus on history through this lens have failed to capture the role of sexuality in the lives of ordinary citizens under the Nazi regime.

Redeploying sexuality

It is no secret that totalitarian ideologies did not stop at the bedroom door. They sought not only to control their citizens' public activities but also to infiltrate their intimate lives¹. The Nazi regime approached the question of sex in a radically rational

¹ Nazism is not the only regime to have done so. In China, under Mao, sexual positions were politically defined, and there was no room for creativity.

manner: it was theorized, like the reduction of unemployment or the country's military strategy.

Primo Lévi wrote an excellent account of the shock he felt in the face of Nazi barbarism. His rationality and morality prevented him from accessing the regime's logic. And, effectively, it is not easy to take an "understanding" approach to the history of Nazism (although Elissa Mailänder never uses this term).

Very often, Nazism remains the ultimate otherness, the unintelligible, either because researchers cannot or do not want to venture into the twists and turns of this criminal ideology, or because the psychology of the Nazi leaders is pathologized and reduced to madness. Moreover, historiography has tended to reduce Nazism to a monstrous epiphenomenon that does not break the continuity of twentieth-century history – an outburst of absolute barbarism that is therefore ahistorical.

How can sexuality provide a key to understanding the adherence to National Socialism of tens of millions of German and Austrian women and men, and its continuity with what came before and after? How are we to understand the apparent paradox between the removal of political freedom and the promotion of sexual freedom?

The prism of sexuality provides fertile ground for explaining why many felt they had a place in the Third Reich (provided, of course, that they were heterosexual and "Aryan"). Nazism skillfully exploited sexuality, not to repress it, but to redeploy it in the service of its goals and reinvent it according to racist criteria. Individuals were encouraged to indulge in playful heterosexual activity for both reproductive and recreational purposes. According to Christian Ingrao, Nazism was "about hatred and anguish, [...] but also about hope, joy, ardor and utopia²". It would be very simplistic to think of sexuality under Nazism as being oppressed and disciplined, and Elissa Mailänder shows this masterfully.

Everyday histories

Mailänder uses a wide variety of sources: letters, diaries, photograph albums (in particular the *Sammlung Frauennachlässe* – Collection of Women's Estates – in

² Christian Ingrao, *La Promesse de l'Est. Espérance et génocide, 1939-1943*, Paris, Seuil, 2016, p. 23.

Vienna), propaganda films, the Billy Wilder film *A Foreign Affair* (1947), documents of the American military administration between 1944 and 1949, and accounts given by readers of *Liebe und Ehe* magazine. The author is aware that it is impossible to verify the authenticity of these testimonies, but she assumes that the heuristic interest lies not in the truth, but rather in the "truth status" that a witness account enjoys in a given society.

Her method is known as *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life), which is also a history of representations. It is an attempt to restore individuals' subjectivity by accepting the fragmentary nature of sources³. The book also owes a great deal to Alf Lüdtke. His concept of *Eigensinn* (stubbornness) helps us to recognize the mechanisms by which individuals appropriate (or not) external constraints. Like Martin Broszat's concept of *Resistenz*, it is often used, also in research on the German Democratic Republic, to understand how individuals experienced the dictatorship.

The author could also have drawn on James Scott and the "infrapolitics" of ordinary people, an important tool for conceiving domination without alienation: the challenge lies in shedding light on fragmentary actions of resistance that remained hidden from the authorities' field of vision, which James Scott calls the "hidden transcript". It would have been very effective for describing the case of the Austrian judges whom Mailänder studied, who took advantage of the little leeway they had to interpret Nazi marriage law⁴.

Women and the Nazi regime

The book's structure is well thought out, in seven completely different chapters that each serves as a spotlight. The periodization (1930-1950, rather than 1933-1945) is

³ One of the representative works of the *Alltagsgeschichte* is Dorothee Wierling's book on housemaids. Whereas in traditional historiography housemaids were thought to provide a privileged insight into the world of the bourgeoisie – as a reverse side of the mirror, and an object of fantasy and of strategies of exclusion or, on the contrary, integration – Dorothee Wierling focuses on them as a social group that has been silenced. She endeavours to reconstruct their world, but avoids the external perspective that has always dominated them. See Dorothee Wierling, *Mädchen für alles, Arbeitsalltag und Lebensgeschichte städtischer Dienstmädchen um die Jahrhundertwende*, Bonn, Dietz Verlag, 1987.

⁴ Many bidenominal couples who had previously lived in harmony filed for divorce after 1938, sometimes to protect one of them by anticipating the expropriation of their home or the liquidation of a joint business: these were "reasonable divorces" requested in an effort to safeguard the couple's assets.

surprising at first glance: the book in fact focuses on the period from the early 1930s to the 1950s, and this periodization allows the author to highlight the fact that Nazism was indeed not merely a parenthesis.

Given the patriarchal, virilist and anti-feminist nature of the Nazi regime, it is surprising to note that it was specifically the Nazis who significantly developed and professionalized women's work. Many young women were thrilled to gain professional opportunities, move out of the family home without having to get married, acquire social status and respect (Nazism made them feel that they were taken seriously), and enjoy leisure activities while failing to grasp their political significance, as Mailänder shows⁵. Sport, for example, strengthened their emotional ties to Nazism.

This regime also conveyed an image of modernity. For example, the *Mutter-Kind-Heime* welcomed unmarried pregnant women with no moral condemnation: a breath of modernity that broke with the Catholic and ultra-conservative tradition of Austrofascism in Austria and, more generally, with bourgeois modesty. As Mailänder lays bare, the regime created a new phenomenon: women for whom it was unthinkable to sacrifice their professional, economic, but also sexual and emotional independence on the altar of marriage.

Similarly, thanks to the social events (dances, for example) organized between soldiers and women of the Reich Labor Service and the League of German Girls, the war itself came to be seen as a joyful and entertaining enterprise, with a strong erotic charge, as seen from the correspondence studied by the author. Mailänder shows that Nazism "motivated people to [...] internalize the rules while leaving them space to develop on a personal level" (p. 187).

The history of everyday life allows us to draw conclusions about more than just everyday life: the case of young Erika, for example, who so often changed the object of her desire, says a great deal about the Nazi-induced transformation of gender relations, whose most traditional aspects were violently shaken up (p. 178). The same can be said for the very relative success of the American army's efforts, after 1945, to deter soldiers from having sex with German women by offering them alternatives

⁵ This reasoning makes it possible to move past the debate about the role of women in Nazism, which pits those who believe they were facilitators and accomplices of the Hitler regime, (Claudia Koonz for example), against the researchers who defend the theory that they were primarily victims of the eugenicist and pro-natalist policy (such as Gisela Bock). It was possible, however, to be both simultaneously.

(such as tiring them out through sport) or trying to instill in them the idea that it is not the sexual act that makes a man (p. 290).

Asserting Nazi dominance

This observation from below also confirms the finding that the boundaries of sexual domination are porous. In the American-occupied zone, there were numerous instances of "sexual fraternization" owing to the soldiers' financial power, showing that the line between coercion and consent can be fluid. The author's arguments on the patriarchal sex market in the U.S. occupation zone echo highly topical debates.

Mailänder also illustrates the contradictions of the Nazi system: promoting fidelity and satisfaction within the couple while encouraging them to be sexually liberated. The Wehrmacht was the only European army to maintain its own brothels, issue its soldiers with a weekly supply of condoms, and build post-coital hygiene stations. Sexual war crimes were more or less tolerated, particularly on the Eastern Front, where sex was seen as a "powerful way to assert Nazi dominance" (p. 252).

There are some themes that remain under-discussed in the book, but it was obviously impossible for the author to cover every aspect of such a broad subject. It is regrettable that she did not devote any of the text to the establishment of *Freie Körper Kultur* (nudism) in Germany. She also shows that political instruction, e.g. Nazi motherhood training, was skillfully concealed within leisure programs and "soft pedagogies that made greater use of seduction and motivation" (p. 66), and that this was a consequence of the development of educational sciences from the beginning of the 20th century. The role of Steiner, for example, should probably have been explored.

Some statements could be qualified. On the issue of propaganda films, for example, Mailänder writes: "Few people, no doubt, perceived the underlying racial propaganda behind these images, which made their political message all the more effective" (p. 206). There is a lack of sources to prove this.

Similarly, the assertion that Nazism "acted less by coercion and repression than by incitement and participation" (p. 362) seems too hasty: it is difficult to distinguish between the two, and the fact that "incitement and participation" are under study here should not mean that repression should be minimized. Foucault insisted that reducing techniques of power to repressive elements was a major mistake, but showing that

Nazism drew its strength from entertainment and sexual energy does not invalidate our knowledge of the extremely brutal mechanisms of repression, which were also a source of Nazi "strength".

In my view, the book ultimately shows that there is nothing inherently progressive or emancipatory about the concept of "sexual liberation". This is a very important idea. Elissa Mailänder greatly enriches our perception of the sexual and emotional issues of the Second World War. I personally learned a great deal. Nazism is not a fixed doctrine, but is in fact surprisingly flexible. The book confirms this in a very convincing way.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, December 23, 2021.

Translated by Susannah Dale, with the support of Cairn.info

Published in booksandideas.net, May 2023.