Female Administrators of the Third Reich

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'Gerda G' was a secretary who worked for the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (RSHA), or the Reich Security Main Office of Nazi Germany. Gerda obtained the job after she had finished commercial college, motivated by the desire to avoid her *Pflichtjahr*, the compulsory year of domestic or agricultural service that women under the age of 25 in the Third Reich were compelled to complete. During her time at the RSHA, Gerda worked for several different departments, including counterintelligence and the Department for Polish Affairs. Her secretarial duties were seemingly innocuous: she answered the phone, typed letters, and sent telegrams. However, through performing these duties, Gerda - and indeed the thousands of other women who worked as administrators for the Third Reich - played a part in facilitating the Holocaust. In her meticulously researched book, Rachel Century demonstrates that these secretaries typed lists of Jews to be deported to concentration camps - a job that ultimately enabled the Holocaust to occur. Yet, in spite of their role as facilitators of the genocide, female administrators have received little attention by historians. Century remedies this in her study, producing an eye-opening, analytical and highly nuanced book that sheds light on the 'ordinary women' who administrated for the regime. The key strength of the monograph lies in its breaking of new historiographical ground.

The overriding theme that permeates Century's book is whether the women who administrated for the Third Reich were 'victims' or 'perpetrators' of the regime. Here, the author engages with the *Historikerinnenstreit*, or 'quarrel amongst historians of women' of the 1980s. Claudia Koonz argued that women were perpetrators of Nazism, as they 'made possible a murderous state in the name of concerns they defined as motherly'.⁽¹⁾ She suggests that women contributed to the stability of the Nazi regime, as they provided men with love and reassurance after a day of killing.⁽²⁾ Koonz's contention aroused an evocative response from Gisela Bock, who argued that women were not perpetrators of Nazism but victims, since they suffered due to the racist and sexist policies of the regime.⁽³⁾ Century argues that female administrators were not 'perpetrators in the classical sense' in that they maimed or killed others, which raises wider questions about how we define a 'perpetrator'. However, the author contends that these women were hardly victims of the Third Reich either: while their gender made them subordinate to men, some were able to challenge the regime's expectations of women by obtaining positions of responsibility or questioning their duties. Ultimately, Century resists grouping female administrators into the categories of 'victims' or 'perpetrators', and contends instead that women in Nazi Germany must be considered as individuals, like men, who have

multiple narratives that cannot be encompassed by single, unitary definitions. In challenging the 'victims vs perpetrators' dichotomy and indeed the conceptual utility of these terms, Century's view echoes that of the historian Adelheid von Saldern, who argues that we abandon our search for 'pure types'.⁽⁴⁾

Yet *Female Administrators of the Third Reich* goes far beyond the 'victims' vs 'perpetrators' debate. Century's work reflects the recent shift in historiography on women in Nazi Germany that departs from focusing solely on this trope *to explore other topics*, as exemplified in Elissa Mailänder's *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence*. As such, Century examines the motivations of female administrators to work for the Nazi regime, their everyday experiences, and their relations with SS men.

With regard to the wider theoretical framework of the monograph, Century situates her study within the field of gender studies, which enables her to analyse the relationships female administrators had with their male bosses and to 'establish the extent to which women were victims of the men, or perpetrators alongside them'. (p. 4) More widely, this is reflective of the scholarly move to abandon 'women's history' in the traditional sense – with a focus solely on women's experiences – in favour of examining their lives in relation to men. However, it might have been useful to know which gender historians influenced Century's approach; the bibliography does not cite any scholars who have theorised gender in a historical sense.

A common problem for historians studying the Third Reich is the lack of source material in comparison to other historical periods, since the Nazis destroyed many documents once it became apparent that they had lost the war. However, Century manages to obtain a wide range of sources to piece together an extensive amount of information about the women who typed for the Nazi regime. She draws mainly on SS Personnel files and marriage documentation; in Nazi Germany, those who wished to marry were required to provide detailed family history records and information about their careers. Century uses these sources to provide details about the backgrounds of some female administrators. Trial documents are also used; some secretaries testified for or against their male superiors after the war. While Jurgen Matthäus has complained that historians are 'obsessed' with using evidence from court in their studies of Nazi Germany, this charge certainly cannot be applied to Century; she neatly balances evidence from trial documents with that procured from other sources.⁽⁵⁾ Through the case study of female administrators, the author demonstrates the importance of these sources in order to discern the post-war treatment of individuals who were involved in the Nazi regime. The author also uses oral testimonies from some women administrators as a source, including two interviews that she conducted herself.

Century's study explores three groups of female administrators in the Third Reich. The first two chapters focus on the *Nachrichtenhelferinnen des Heeres* and the *SS-Helferinnen* in a mostly comparative format. These groups worked in communications and assisted the *Wehrmacht*. The *SS-Helferinnen* was created in 1939, designed by Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, to be an elite group, comprising only of racially healthy women who were ideologically devoted to Nazism. *SS-Helferinnen* were encouraged to marry their male bosses and produce multiple children to fulfil the Nazi goal of producing an 'Aryan' race. Conversely, the *Nachrichtenhelferinnen*, formed in 1940, were not designated for such a purpose; they were only encouraged to fulfil their administrative duties. This group was held in low-esteem amongst the German population; they were known as 'Offiziersmatratzen' (officer's mattresses), and Hitler was keen to distinguish the *Nachrichtenhelferinnen* from the 'elite' *SS-Helferinnen*. Chapters three, four and five of Century's book analyse the secretaries who were employed by the RSHA. While the *Nachrichtenhelferinnen* and the *SS-Helferinnen* specifically assisted the army, women who had careers in the RSHA worked in a variety of different offices.

In the first chapter, Century engages with the recruitment of female administrators by the National Socialist government. She notes that women who were deemed to be 'racially suitable' to work for the *SS-Helferinnen* in the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (BDM, or the League of German Girls) were approached directly; this ensured the required ideological commitment to the Nazi Party. SS men were also encouraged to recommend their female relatives. The application process for budding *Helferinnen* was rigorous; they had to pass an extensive written examination, which required a detailed level of knowledge about the Nazi Party and its

ideology, and had to meet the requirements of a racial and medical test. Conversely, the recruitment process for *Nachrichtenhelferinnen* differed; women in the Red Cross were approached first before recruitment was extended to the public. All applicants had to be medically fit, proficient in written and spoken German, be of Aryan descent and have no previous convictions. Century notes that requirements for *Nachrichtenhelferinnen* were more lenient towards the end of the conflict; when manpower was exhausted, virtually anyone was accepted. Some *Nachrichtenhelferinnen* were also conscripted; Sigrid Miessner, for example, was compulsorily directed into the *Nachrichtenhelferinnen* when the National Socialist government introduced female conscription in 1943. Century notes in chapter five that many women who worked for the RSHA were also conscripted. The author's marshalling of this evidence supports the view of Gisela Bock, that the Nazis did not always implement the policy of 'Kinder, Küche, and Kirche' (children, kitchen and church) towards women: economic necessity propelled the regime to compel women to work.⁽⁶⁾ However, Century notes that women administrators were encouraged to leave their jobs when they became pregnant, which indicates that, in the regime's view, they ultimately had more value as mothers than as workers. It would be interesting to know more about how the RSHA recruited female secretaries besides conscription; this is not a topic that the author engages with extensively, since the focus centres on the recruitment of the *SS-Helferinnen* and the *Nachrichtenhelferinnen*.

But who were the women who became female administrators? In the first chapter of her book, Century discusses this trope with regards to the *SS-Helferinnen* and the *Nachrichtenhelferinnen*. She asserts that *SS-Helferinnen* mostly came from families who were ideologically committed to the Nazi Party, which is unsurprising given the stringent ideological requirements for this group. Some were also of noble backgrounds. Conversely, the *Nachrichtenhelferinnen* had differing backgrounds; Sigrid Meissner had previously completed an apprenticeship in the textile industry before she was conscripted into the *Nachrichtenhelferinnen*, while Käthe Minges served as a street car conductor for two years prior to entering *Nachrichten* service. In Chapter Five, Century notes that women who worked for the RSHA also came from a 'variety of backgrounds' (p. 84). The evidence provided by the author can be used to infer that there was ultimately no 'typical' woman who administrated for the *Nachrichtenhelferinnen* or the RSHA.

Another interesting theme Century engages with is what motivated women to work as administrators for the Third Reich. In the first chapter, she draws on a key difference between the motives of the *SS-Helferinnen* and the *Nachrichtenhelferinnen*: the latter were generally less ideologically motivated than the former, which further supports Century's contention that the *SS-Helferinnen* was intended by the regime to be an elite group comprised of women committed to the goals of National Socialism. Many of the women who administrated for this organisation were members of the Nazi Party or affiliated organisations. However, the author notes that some *Nachrichtenhelferinnen* were in fact also ideologically motivated, denoting a wider strength of her book – Century never assumes that her conclusions can be ubiquitously applied and draws out the nuances evident in her sources. The desire to support the Nazi Party was also evident amongst some women who worked for the RSHA; Ruth I., for example, recalled that her membership of the Nazi Party and dedication to the local branch inspired her to work for the RSHA.

Yet, perhaps surprisingly, Century demonstrates that the motivations of female administrators were generally mundane. Some *Nachrichtenhelferinnen* simply relished the opportunity to leave home, while others wanted to travel abroad. Others wanted to wear the uniform of the *Nachrichtenhelferinnen*; Ursula R. was impressed by the 'chic uniform' that she had seen in magazines. (p. 31) One might draw a comparison here between these motivations and that of women in Britain to join the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS); contemporary accounts suggest that it was the thrill of wearing a nice looking uniform rather than the presence of patriotism or a strong desire to serve the country that was an important motivating factor to join the service.

In chapter four, Century notes that the motivations of women to work for the RSHA were generally similarly banal. Financial motives drove many, often due to the economic situation imposed by war. A comparison can be drawn here with the motives of women who worked as guards in Nazi concentration camps; *transcripts from the post-war trials of the Ravensbrück concentration camp personnel illustrate that the need to earn money propelled many women to seek employment at the camp. The reviewer's own research on female doctors and nurses in the Third Reich has also discerned such motivations.*

This evidence conforms to the argument of Gisela Bock, who notes that employment was just as decisive a factor for the involvement of women in Nazi crimes as it was for most men.⁽⁷⁾ It also reflects the now widely accepted historiographical view that conceptualises those who worked for the Third Reich not as ideologically crazed fanatics, but as 'ordinary' people, who were influenced primarily by immediate, circumstantial reasons, which is perhaps most clearly illustrated by Christopher Browning in his seminal book *Ordinary Men*.

Century unravels the experiences of female administrators in rigorous detail. A key part of their day-to-day lives was the relationships they had with male staff. Century notes that *SS-Helferinnen* often married SS men, as Himmler had intended. Many secretaries who worked for the RSHA also married their male bosses, while others became a 'zweitfrau' – an illegitimate second wife. Polygamy was permitted and even encouraged to a certain extent, to fulfil the Nazi goal of producing large numbers of 'racially healthy' children. Other secretaries also became mistresses. The inclusion of numerous personal testimonies from these women about their wartime relationships ensures that they seem much more 'real' to the reader; they are not just a faceless, statistical mass.

The author argues that the relationships female administrators experienced with SS men enabled them to find comfort in their shared experiences, but did not allow them to gain a deeper insight into their work. This relates to one of the central questions of the monograph: how much did female administrators actually know about the Holocaust? Century concludes in chapter five that the secretaries who worked for the RSHA knew, at least to some extent, of the persecution of Jews and other minorities. Although many later claimed in their testimonies to have been uninterested in their work due to youth, Century contends that they could not ignore what was in front of them. Ruth T., for example, was able to infer from her workload that deaths occurred in concentration camps, and that this was confidential. The author also notes that some *SS-Helferinnen* knew about the persecution of those whom the Nazis deemed to be worthless; Hermine S., who worked as an administrator at Auschwitz, stated that she knew the word *Sonderbehandlung* meant the gassing of prisoners. However, Century notes that most of the *Nachrichtenhelferinnen* appear to have been naïve to the persecution of Jews, and whether they knew information depended on their role and location.

The last two chapters of the book analyse how the three groups of female administrators – the *SS-Helferinnen*, *Nachrichtenhelferinnen* and the RSHA – experienced the immediate aftermath of the war, their subsequent treatment by the Allies, and the consequences of their wartime jobs. These women were frequently relocated and reassigned towards the end of the conflict, and their treatment by the Allies varied. Some were able to restart their careers, but others were interned, some underwent the denazification process in internment camps, and some faced denazification tribunals at home. Century provides a valuable contribution to literature on de-nazification in post-war Germany, which has mostly neglected the experiences of women. Detrimental consequences continued beyond the immediate post-war period; familial frictions occurred as offspring discovered what their mothers did during the war.

Century's work has many strengths: her thorough analysis, nuanced conclusions and use of new material deserve to be highly commended. The study is composed of various thematic strands that provide the reader with a thorough overview of the different groups of women who administered for the Third Reich, while also maintaining a focus on the testimony of individuals. Century's extension of her study beyond the collapse of the Nazi regime is particularly informative. The monograph also paves the way for similar work on specific groups of women in Nazi Germany, such as female medical personnel; the topic of the reviewer's current research. However, there is a key weakness of the study: Century does not engage enough with the methodological issues that permeate the use of oral history as a source, in spite of her frequent citations of testimony collated from former female administrators. The comments she does make might appear a little basic or obvious to the reader; for example, she notes that memory can 'fade or be altered over time'. (p. 8) She also does not consult any key works which discuss the methodological application of oral history, such as *Oral History Theory* by Lyn Abrams. Consideration of deeper theoretical issues evident in oral history, such as inter-subjectivity – the relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer – might have added greater insight into why the former female administrators recalled particular aspects of their past,

and enhanced the methodological rigour of Century's work. Further, it would be interesting to know if Century noticed that the media narrative of certain high-profile female administrators – for example, Hitler's former secretary, Traudl Junge – was present in the testimony of these women. This might have had a bearing on the sorts of conclusions these women came to about their role during the Nazi regime.

In spite of this criticism, Century's work remains highly valuable and her use of oral testimony ultimately serves to bring the experiences of female administrators to life. The key merit of this monograph is that it makes visible the women who ultimately allowed the Holocaust to occur: as the author notes, while these women did not execute orders for the persecution of Jews themselves, the genocide could not have been accomplished without those who typed the orders, answered the telephones, and sent the telegrams. Female administrators had the opportunity to question their orders and find out more about the Holocaust, but generally, they did not. They had some awareness of the Holocaust, and did nothing. Many recalled their time working for the Third Reich with fondness and nostalgia. At a time when the rise of the extreme right is increasingly concerning, it is ever more important to learn about those who worked for an extremist regime in order to understand how ordinary people become involved, and Century's book is timely in this respect. She leaves the reader with the somewhat disconcerting perspective that women who administrated for the Nazis were 'ordinary', with no previous disposition towards the facilitation of genocidal policies, affirming the potential for all humans to contribute to atrocity.

Notes

1. C. Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland* (New York, 1987), p. 5.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ibid, p. 17.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. G. Bock, 'Anti-natalism, paternity and maternity in National Socialist realism', in D. Crew (ed.), *Nazism and German Society* (London, 1994), p. 110.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. A. von Saldern, 'Victims or Perpetrators'?, in D. Crew (ed.), *Nazism and German Society* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 141.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. J. Matthäus, 'Historiography and the Perpetrators of the Holocaust', in D. Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 210.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Bock, 'Anti-natalism, paternity and maternity in National Socialist realism', p. 110.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. G. Bock, 'Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany', in D. Ofer and L. Weitzman (eds.), *Women in the Holocaust* (London, 1998), p. 91.[Back to \(7\)](#)

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