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German Women Writing about the End of the Second World War – A Feminist Analysis

Abstract

This article gives insight into a research project still in progress about diaries written by ~~as~~ German acknowledged women during National Socialism, particularly, the Second World War and the period immediately after the War and the breakdown of the NS system. Such research from a feminist standpoint proves to be complicated. On the one hand, women were marginalised by the fascist system. On the other, being acknowledged as German granted them privileges over those considered non-German or degenerated (ranging from being included in the welfare state system to the privilege of not being sterilised and/or murdered). The interest in this analysis is an archaeological investigation of cultural memory of this period still influential. Apart from this discussion the paper entails an example of an interdisciplinary feminist analysis of passages of two diaries written immediately after the breakdown of the system. The methodology is a discourse analytical approach that makes use of studies from different disciplinary contexts in order to show the different discursive layers within the texts such as the image of the female comrade of a soldier and the unfaithful women. In both cases, aspects of a 'new' female German identity become visible in which parts of the 'old' German identity were transformed and re-integrated. This process involved the rejection of aspects clearly linked to the NS system and, not surprisingly, a projection of the immorality of this system onto women who sexually engage with foreign soldiers. Thus, making them responsible for the betrayal of the national German community just as the NS system had done prior.

Key words: Gender; Sexuality; German identity; National Socialism; cultural memory;
diaries

Introduction

This article gives insight on work still in progress about diaries written by women during the Second World War who were acknowledged as being German by the National Socialist system. I will, first, introduce some general problems of conducting such research and display some of my related aims for it and, second, give an example of the methodology I currently develop for my analysis.

Conducting feminist research on the period of National Socialism in Germany is a difficult issue. The fascist system marginalized women. Nevertheless, women acknowledged as German were privileged as the superior race and as such took part in the system of power. Some were even actively involved in the death machine. As a result, it is impossible to speak of women on the whole as victims of the particular patriarchal system of National Socialism (Leck 2002) like some authors argued in the 1980s (e.g. Bock 1986). The debate amongst historians arguing for and against German victimization in terms of expellation and bombing 'in general' (as usual meaning mainly male victims or perpetrators) was followed by another on whether German women could for the most part be seen as victims or perpetrators. Claudia Koonz (1987) as well as Karin Windaus-Walser (1988) argued that by agreeing to the national socialist female role as housewife and mother German women morally supported the fascist system and were thus perpetrators. However, this argument has been deconstructed by Birthe Kundrus (1995) who states that by accusing housewives of genocide one deflects from the real perpetrators. The individual involvement therefore has to be differentiated. The feminist problematic of portraying women as victims is thus further intensified, since any form of German victimization needs to be carefully approached within the wider frame of the German state as aggressor (cf. Assmann 2006). As a result, the biggest challenge is now seen as investigating the role of women beyond the victim/perpetrator dichotomy (cf. Herkommer 2005: 78). This goal can be pursued by analysing the complexity of gender relations during this period of time and by investigating the continuity of some aspects of these relations.

In my research, I therefore focus on the end of the Second World War, hence, the end of National Socialism and as a consequence, the start of a new national identity. Since the population has not yet been divided into two states there is still no split into Eastern and Western German identities. However, national identity is always gendered and as a result, women and men relate very differently to the loss of the war, the change of the system and the discovery of war crimes such as the genocide of all Jewish people in Europe. Moreover, individual men and women reflect on these issues very differently according to their relation to National Socialism as well as to other aspects such as their class background. Furthermore, it is of particular interest to investigate how these 'old' issues were transformed and integrated into a new national identity immediately after the war.

The sources I investigate are unpublished diaries written between January and September 1945 by women acknowledged as German. Despite the fact that diary writing was

supported by the National Socialist State and consequently blossomed throughout that period especially during the Second World War in Germany (cf. Nieden 1993: 59), there are few studies about them. In 1993 Susanne zur Nieden published the first monograph focusing on unpublished diaries of women in Berlin. Other researchers like Margarthe Doerr (2002) used diaries in addition to interviews in order to reconstruct women's daily life at the 'home front'. Again others like Regina Mühlhäuser (1998) and Atina Grossmann (1994) focused on diaries already published (by authors themselves or relatives of them) in order to examine narratives of sexual violence. Even though diaries are never private, never the pure inner voice of a person (cf. Dusini 2005: 68), published diaries appear to be more polished, maybe rewritten afterwards for the broader public. Some of the unpublished diaries I found were also subsequently rewritten for relatives and friends. However, in contrast to many diaries that were published twenty or more years later (and hence most likely rewritten), unpublished diaries were mostly rewritten immediately after the war. As a result, they still bear the witness of the same period, because they were not altered according to changing social discourses.

My interest in this period of time is not just historical, I also aim to discover the "the historical sedimentation of many-layered discursive products, this stock of culturally coded definitions, requirements and expectations about women or female identity [...] tattooed on our skin" (Braidotti 2002: 41). In other words, my intent is to investigate the present German cultural memory of National Socialism in its gendered structure. Rosi Braidotti reminds us that psychoanalysis is not only a cultural theory, but also a cure from inscribed stereotyped images (2002). In order to make half conscious aspects of the cultural memory in Germany visible I do not psychoanalyse myself or other individuals. Rather, I analyse discourses which I find in the diaries written by women acknowledged as German. Some of these discourses are silent sub-layers of German cultural memory – making them visible will hopefully facilitate finding a cure from them.

In the remainder of this paper, I would like to provide an example of my interpretation methodology which consists of amalgamating historical research with sociological and cultural analyses. I combine historical research on National Socialism, German nationalism and the gender relations within them with theoretical work on gender relations, femininity, masculinity, sexuality and nationalism. Together these form the background against which I read and interpret the diaries. In the following, I will exemplify

this methodology with statements from two diaries written by different women in the northern part of Germany which became the British zone in spring of 1945. They exemplify how discourses about gender and race were transformed and integrated into new forms of German identity.

Observing Prostitution

Nelly: "The women are already jumping at the chance to have a go with the others, how is that possible – for a piece of chocolate they stroll all over the marketplace in Biel. No, no, it's just not right."¹ (May 22, 1945)

In this passage Nelly reports on what she interprets as prostitution. She describes the women as active not as victims. They pursue prostitution not for basic material needs, but for what they consider luxury goods such as chocolate. The subject of the "erotic fraternisation" of Austrian and German women after the Second World War (Nieden 2002: 313) is not new to feminist research. The Australian researcher Hsu-Ming Teo (1996) interpreted prostitution during that period in Germany as part of a continuum of sexual violence starting with violent acts such as rape and ending at courtship caused by hunger. Related to her approach are theories of sexual violence as a war strategy to humiliate the enemy repeatedly as well as to recreate the male community (Card 1997). These theories remain valid. In the case of the Second World War and sexuality in Austria and Germany there is additional research focusing on the women themselves. Research conducted by Susanne zur Nieden (2002) as well as Ingrid Bauer (1996) suggest that women having sexual relationships with foreign soldiers moved on a continuum between being forced into prostitution in order to survive and feed their children, and striving for new experiences after a long war (Bauer 1996: 111).

Nelly interprets the women's behaviour as probably striving for amusement and/or luxury. Additionally, in a passage preceding this quote Nelly describes the British soldiers as being correct and cautious ("korrekt und zurückhaltend"). Whereas, she views the women as playing the active part, she admires the soldiers from a distance for their politeness. Given that her interpretation of the activity of those women is right and that she does not condemn

¹ „Die Frauen ziehen schon alle los mit den Andern, wie ist das möglich, für ein Stück Schokolade flankieren sie auf dem Platz von Biel. Nein, nein, das ist nicht richtig.“

hungry women, their interest in new experiences is easy to understand from today's perspective. The question remains: why does Nelly not agree with them? In order to find plausible explanations for this, other diary passages as well as the discursive context on femininity, masculinity, sexuality, prostitution, National Socialism and the war need to be taken into account.

The above passage is dated May 22, 1945 – two weeks after capitulation. Her description of the women as "already" being in contact with soldiers is reminiscent of the myth of the "quick capitulation" of German women after the Second World War. Sexual relationships with foreign soldiers were commonly interpreted as failure and betrayal of the sense of community among the German *Volk* (cf. Nieden 2002; Bauer 1996: 111). For many at the end of the war, this was most likely no longer related to a National Socialist community but to one's relatives, friends and acquaintances. If one considers other passages it becomes clear that Nelly shared this view. Even though she knew about and was uncritical towards the National Socialist "attempt" to solve the "Jewish question" ("der Versuch die Judenfrage zu lösen", 28.09.1943), she was relieved that Germany lost the war. She was neither a member of the National Socialist party nor the women's association and feared being discriminated (10.05.1945). Nevertheless, she mourned that all the sacrifices, especially of male soldiers at the front, had been in vain ("alle Opfer umsonst gewesen", 15.05.1945). Hence, it seems that in her view the women prostituting themselves or looking for courtship of the foreign soldiers behaved badly towards those men who fought (also for them).

Even though these feelings might have been privatized and not related to National Socialist ideology anymore, they still fit into the system. During the war women were activated as the warriors companion(s), keeping the home front, supporting male soldiers and waiting for them. There were regulations which ensured that only 'Aryan' women could become a soldier's wife and those who did were supported more generously in Germany than in other countries (cf. Kundrus 1995). This strategy was chosen in order to secure the moral support of the population. However, a soldier's wife could be deprived of the financial support if she was found to have been unfaithful (cf. Kundrus 1995). If these relationships were with foreigners, the treatment was even harsher (cf. Kundrus 1995: 380ff). Underlying this was the construction of race. On the one hand, 'Aryan' German women were born 'Aryans', yet on the other hand, their racial status was related to social success and

appropriate behaviour. As a result, one could also lose one's status. Prostitutes, like gay men for example, were considered 'deteriorated'.

So far my interpretation has shown that prostitutes were found unacceptable by both the old National Socialist system and the new German identity that was just starting to develop. However, there were still other aspects to the debate on courtship between German women and foreign soldiers. These I will discuss based on the second diary.

Observing *Observing* Prostitution

Inge: "Everywhere there is outrage at the women seen being courted by the soldiers in broad daylight. "Hitler raised whores, that's what he wanted", an old man said. ... The BdM education didn't last a week." (5562, 1035).²

With these words, Inge describes how people became indignant about German women seeking sexual relationships with foreign soldiers. There are two astonishing breaks within this passage. The first is the quote of the old man saying Hitler had intended to raise whores. The second is the author's statement that the education of the state invented girls' association (BdM) did not last long. What do these breaks imply?

To begin with, it is remarkable that Inge does not write about peoples' outrage about the death camps. Bergen Belsen was a prime example of a one who did. She knew about the camps and was upset about National Socialism. She was relieved to be living in Hamburg where the war had ended a bit earlier and was occupied by the British Army. That people were infuriated by women either prostituting themselves or having love-affairs with foreign soldiers confirms that people became very obsessed with sexuality after the Second World War (Nieden 2002). The debate on female sexuality is not unique to Germany. In her work on the relationship between young women and US soldiers in Britain during the Second World War, Sonya O. Rose (1998) discovers similar strands. British women went out with US soldiers who were not only foreign, but also better off than their British colleagues and thus triggered similar discussions in Britain. Rose argues that female sexuality is frequently

² German original: "Überall Empörung gegen die Frauenzimmer, die man bei hellem Tag die Soldaten umbuhlen sieht. 'Huren hat der Hitler erzogen', sagte ein alter Mann, 'so wollte er es ja'. ... Es hat ja die BdM-Erziehung keine Woche vorgehalten."

debated during periods of change and that by examining female sexuality people discussed what it meant to be British (Rose 1998). Similarly, one could argue that in Germany by being irate about women having sexual relationships with foreign soldiers a new German identity was being discussed.

This argument is based on the well researched observation that women increasingly become the representative of moral qualities and cultural values during the development of different nationalisms. According to Mosse (1987) the figure of the chaste woman became the symbol for continuity and stability of a nation (Ibid. 21). This meaning was further advanced by Christina von Braun (1997) who stated that through secularism the meaning of the pure blood of Jesus was translated to the pure blood of a nation. Purity, thus, became the symbol for the unity of a nation or a people's body excluding everything foreign, everything that could cause impurity. Hence, 'purity' appears to have a double-meaning in relation to female sexuality: firstly, it is connected to chastity and secondly, to a woman's choice of a sexual partner within or outside a social group (cf. Dane 2005: 97ff).

As Dagmar Herzog (2005) pointed out the National Socialist system was sexually restrictive for all 'non-Aryans', but provided increased sexual freedom for all 'Aryans', and in particular for men. As a result there were repeated debates between conservative groups such as Catholics and National Socialists about sexuality.³ Herzog (2005) gives examples of families refusing to let their girls go to the local BDM group (Bund Deutscher Mädel/Association of German Girls), because they feared their girls would learn to have a lax sexual attitude. However, sex with foreigners (civil or forced labourers as well as prisoners of war) was in most cases strictly prohibited, and only in exceptions allowed with other 'Aryan' races such as French civil workers (cf. Kundrus 2002). Thus, National Socialism mainly built upon the second meaning of purity, the purity of the nation's body. As a consequence, this old man could state that the increased sexual permissiveness during National Socialism (as well as the absence of men to watch their daughters and sisters) would ruin the moral of young women.

Subsequently, BDM education was in most cases not about (or at least not only about) sexual permissiveness. During National Socialism everything was designed to serve the war. The BDM groups were intended to educate the National Socialist women who would support

³ Julia Roos (2002) exemplifies this repeated debate in relation to prostitution policy.

a male soldier to fight and give birth to new soldiers (Rose 1998).⁴ Marriage was not a value as such and was instead supported mainly for strategic war reasons. Since these policies aimed also at keeping young women away from foreign men failed, Inge could write that the education promoting them only lasted for a short while.

Ingrid Bauer (1996) argued that the women having sexual relationships with US soldiers in Austria caused outrage, because they acted against the idea of a 'pure' race and nation. This is definitely the case here, too. However, there is yet another important aspect. The old man links these women back to National Socialism. In doing so he draws on other meanings associated with femininity. In early modernity the assumption was held that women were closer to sexuality than men. Since sexuality was still a sin, thus, related to evil, women were seen as being prone to becoming a witch and hence, a mate of the devil. This traditional association between femininity and evil resonates in the quote from the old man. As a result, female sexuality was associated with the continuation of the NS system. The obsession with sexuality therefore, implies a deflection from the real scandal to women seeking relief either from hunger or from war experiences. As a second consequence, female sexuality was able to be very easily put back into its place in the 1950s (cf. Herzog 2005).

Final Remarks

In Germany there is a highly developed, official, memorial culture in terms of the Second World War and the genocide. However, there is still an imbalance in discussing issues such as how much people bought into or actually agreed to certain policies of the system and to what extent discourses of this period of time were transformed and re-integrated into a new German national identity after the Second World War. As mentioned earlier, my aim is to make such discourses, the history "tattooed on our skins" (Braidotti 2002: 41) visible. These few passages only exemplify the methodology I am still developing for exposing these transformed and re-integrated discourses (that as a consequence, might still be present in the contemporary German cultural memory of that period) as well as the deflections from the war

⁴ However, according to Sonya O. Rose the BdM leader often failed this political goal and offered a space for doing things such as playing games, singing and knitting.

crimes to little moral sidesteps. There are still many open questions to solve, such as which parts of them can still be traced today and what shifts have they undergone since then.

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