

Photographing the Feminine:
Aufseherinnen in Holocaust Photography and Popular Culture, 1944-2018

By

Brittany Long

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

In

History

Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario

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Abstract:

Between 1939 and 1945, National Socialist Germany mobilized upwards of 500,000 female auxiliaries into the German armed forces. Approximately 3,700 of these auxiliaries participated in, and carried out, systemic violence against Nazi concentration camp victims. The female overseers who worked in the Nazi camps consisted of a diverse group of “ordinary” women from various backgrounds and individual identity. Post-war discussions established a narrative of ‘masculinity’ and ‘deviancy’ surrounding the *Aufseherinnen* that continues within current public memory. Examining Holocaust photographs taken by Nazi concentration camp staff and Allied liberation troops this thesis expands current knowledge on the workaday lives of female SS guards (*Aufseherinnen*).

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Jennifer Evans, whose support was the guiding force in the completion of this thesis. I owe a huge debt of gratitude for your guidance and insight throughout my research and writing process.

I would also like to thank the staff at the Carleton History Department for your advice and support, which has been invaluable. I owe a special thanks to Dr. Susan Whitney, Dr. Chinnaiah Jangam, and Dr. Paul Nelles for the mentorship I received both inside and outside of the classroom. The discussions in your seminars profoundly shaped the development of this thesis.

Furthermore, I would like to thank the Monika Schnell, the archivist at the Ravensbrück National Memorial Archive, and the archivists at the Bundesarchiv in Berlin, whose help was indispensable in completing primary research for this project. Navigating archives in another language is not always the easiest, your patience allowed me to navigate the archives with ease.

I owe a special thanks to those back home in New Brunswick for their continued support and comfort while completing this process during a pandemic. My father's baking for helping me make it through some long and difficult nights of researching and writing, my sister for helping me through countless writing blocks, and my best friend and drill sergeant, Zoe Jackson. Without our late-night talks and countless readings of my drafts I would not have come to the final version of this project.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Two hours north of Berlin in the town of Fürstenberg-Havel, Germany, lies the former Ravensbrück *Frauen-konzentrationslager* (women's concentration camp).

Overlooking the banks of the Schwedtsee, the Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück (Ravensbrück Memorial Site) opened on the 12th of September 1959 as one of three designated national concentration camp memorials in the German Democratic Republic (GDR).¹



Figure 1 Personal photograph taken while researching at the Archives of the Ravensbrück Memorial Site. Overlooking the Schwedtsee.

During the camps operation between 1939 and 1945, Ravensbrück served as the largest concentration compound for women deemed dangerous, deviant, or atypical within the Third Reich. The first female prisoners were transferred from Lichtenburg concentration camp in Prettin, Germany in 1939.² Approximately 120,000 women and children, 20,000

¹ Ravensbrück Memorial Site, "National Memorial and Memorial (1959-1992), <https://www.ravensbrueck-sbg.de/geschichte/1959-1992/>.

²Information Portal to European Sites of Remembrance, Lichtenburg Concentration Camp Memorial, "Introduction," <https://www.memorialmuseums.org/eng/denkmaeler/view/43/Lichtenburg-Concentration-Camp-Memorial>.

men, and 1,200 young women were registered as prisoners throughout the camp's operational period.³

Walking through the memorial in the summer of 2019, I was struck by how stunning the scenery surrounding Ravensbrück was. Following my experience at the Memorial and Museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau, I anticipated a space filled with buildings, crematoria, and rubble; however, what I found was an eerily beautiful landscape where the trees, grass, and flowers had regrown. It was a warm and sunny afternoon, and as I had just concluded my archival research, I decided to walk about the memorial grounds. I came upon a lake facing a brick wall covered in plaques in remembrance of and paying tribute to the victims of National Socialism who were imprisoned and subsequently lost their lives at Ravensbrück (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Memorial Plaques at Ravensbrück. Personal Photograph taken while at the memorial in 2019.

³Ravensbrück Memorial Site, “Women’s Concentration Camp (1939-1945), <https://www.ravensbrueck-sbg.de/geschichte/1939-1945/>.

After reading the inscriptions of each plaque, I felt a deep responsibility as an historian and citizen to attempt to understand the actions and behaviours of the “ordinary people” who participated in the murder of millions. I had spent several years learning about the victims of the Holocaust and the ideology that fuelled National Socialism in seminar classes before travelling to conduct my own research at the Ravensbrück Memorial. I understood how the camp network of concentration and extermination camps functioned alongside the policies that had systemized mass murder.⁴ However, walking on the grounds where thousands of people had lived and died over the course of four years, I realized that I had no conception about the emotional toll of captivity, torture, and execution.

Having read Christopher R. Browning’s *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, and after experiencing the surreal environment of the camp memorial, I was left with questions regarding the role of Nazi women perpetrators in concentration camps in the same “ordinary” terms. How did “ordinary” German women gain employment as guards in concentration facilities that forcibly imprisoned, tortured, and murdered women who were classified as “deviant” by Nazi standards? This included Jews, Jehovah Witnesses, and the Roma and Sinti, along with women who were classified as ‘asocial’ (chiefly sex workers and lesbians), and political prisoners. Socialization within the Third Reich was in no way normal or ordinary especially for those who spent their formative years under the National Socialist

⁴ Not all Nazi camps acted as killing centers. In 1941, Germany established the first death camp Chelmno located in Western Poland followed by Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka in 1942. The largest killing center, Auschwitz-Birkenau was established in 1943. Many, if not most of the *Aufseherinnen* did not work in the killing centers. They remained in the concentration and labour camps like Ravensbrück and its sub-camps where female prisoners were placed for forced labour.

government; however, it would be wrong to assume that ordinariness and normalcy does not exist in societies with ideological violence and extermination.⁵ Taking these circumstances into consideration I employ the term “ordinary” as a tool to give “agency and rationality” to those women who participated in genocide.⁶ The purpose of a gendered and perpetrator-centered analysis is not to excuse or forgive their actions, but rather, to contribute “in human terms” a more comprehensive understanding of “Holocaust perpetrators that [seeks] to go beyond one-dimensional caricature.”⁷

Public memory has played a crucial role in establishing simplistic images of the *Aufseherinnen*. Newspapers, photographs, and popular culture throughout the latter half of the twentieth century nurtured the notion that women who worked within the concentration camps were ‘sadistic,’ ‘deviant,’ ‘promiscuous,’ and ‘masculine.’ Rather than examine how women came to be employed within the concentration camp system this thesis engages with sources of memory formation to analyse how female camp personnel were visually represented during and after the Second World War.

Examining the Holocaust through a gendered lens has not only allowed historians to bring the unique experiences of the Nazis female victims into the larger historical narrative but has expanded our understanding of the role that masculinity has played in the lives of both male victims and perpetrators. Over the past forty years gender has proven to be an important lens through which to further explore and understand the

⁵ For example, the ongoing genocide of Indigenous Nations in the Americas, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and United States slavery laws.

⁶ Kimberly Allar, “Setting the Picture Straight: the Ordinary Women of Nazi Germany and Rwanda who participated in Genocide,” in *Aftermath: Genocide, Memory and History* edited by Karen Auerbach, (Clayton, Victoria, Aus.: Monash University Publishing, 2015), 24.

⁷ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992, 1998), xx.

Holocaust.⁸ Browning's analysis inspired me to expand and challenge the standard conception of "the female perpetrator" beyond the distorted label of the "Deviant Woman." Female concentration guards inhabited a dual identity: possessing power and authority over victims in an artificial environment while simultaneously dispossessed in Nazi society due to their gender and reproductive potential to become mothers. This empowered/dispossessed state provoked questions regarding the actions and mentality of female perpetrators during the Holocaust, but also how they have been remembered as active participants in crimes against humanity. This thesis will confront this dichotomy through a close reading of Holocaust photographs in relation to early public memory formations of women guards presumed to be 'deviant' in Western post-war newsprint. I argue that photographic evidence allows historians to analyse aspects of the *Aufseherinnen*'s (female overseer/guard) everyday lives, their relationships, and identity not yet found within written documents.

1.1 Background: Ravensbrück and the *Aufseherinnen*

Although female perpetration would come to be characterized a certain way, most women's experiences as *Aufseherinnen* followed an average working day with scheduled working hours, breaks for meals, and personal free time. German women began working in the Nazi concentration camps in 1939, at the *Frauen-Konzentrationslager* Ravensbrück.⁹ "Female guards were recruited in one of four ways: active recruitment by

⁸ See, for example, Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, and Marion Kaplan, eds., *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (New York: New Feminist Library, Monthly Review Press, 1984), Susannah Heschel "Does Atrocity have a Gender? Feminist Interpretations of Women in the SS," *Lessons and Legacies VI* (Northwest University Press, 2004), Thomas Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide Hitler's Community, 1918-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁹ Elissa Mailänder, *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: the Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942-1944*, (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2015), 45.

the employment office (*Arbeitsamt*), recruitment by armaments companies that employed concentration camp inmates, recruitment from groups of female factory workers by the SS, and lastly by submitting a written application.”¹⁰ Character and political attitudes were given little consideration when recruitment officers were in search of employable candidates. As German historian Elissa Mailänder has highlighted in her 2015 monograph, *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: the Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942-1944*, criteria concerning a potential guard’s “racial and eugenic background was of greater importance than their ideological or political beliefs.”¹¹

The camp created an environment suitable for both work and family life. Although many *Aufseherin* were single, it was not a requirement for employment. Indeed, several female guards at Ravensbrück were permitted to bring their children into work with them. This “daycare system” became more institutionalized after Germany mobilized all women between the ages of seventeen and forty-five in 1942. Ravensbrück was designed and built with a designated nursery, which was able to support the growing demand for female camp guards.¹² By 1944, Ravensbrück was the administrative core for over forty subcamps, all employing female guards who were responsible for over 70,000 female prisoners.¹³

Work in the camps offered respite from gender expectations and class-specific social norms. The targeted demographic for guard or camp administrative professions were unemployed women, women in low-level jobs, or from the lower-middle and working

¹⁰ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence*, 45.

¹¹ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, 48.

¹² Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, 59.

¹³ “Ravensbrück,” USHMM, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ravensbrueck>.

classes.¹⁴ Many *Aufseherinnen* made the decision to work in the camps to escape difficult family circumstances or to gain greater independence as young single women.¹⁵

Ravensbrück offered women a place to both escape and earn money. What historians have surmised, and what Mailänder has emphasized in her study, is that employment in the camps offered women both financial security and the opportunity for social mobility.¹⁶ This thesis takes up this issue by considering how women guards engaged with each other in their social time and suggests that complex relationships and friendships were formed from living and working in close proximity to one another.

Ravensbrück was the primary training center for new female recruits within the concentration camp system. This training was conducted over a three-month probationary period.¹⁷ Interestingly, the *Aufseherinnen* were not permitted to impose punishments on their own judgement nor were they allowed to “physically assault prisoners.”¹⁸ In fact, upon starting their employment, guards were required to sign a ‘Declaration of Honor’, which stated that it was “the Führer who [made all] decisions on the life or death of an enemy of the state. No National Socialist has the right to strike an enemy of the state or to subject him to physical abuse.”¹⁹ However, based on the available war-time and post-war evidence, it is apparent that these regulations were not always followed.

The lives of the *Aufseherinnen* were designed to follow a strict military regimen. As Mailänder has outlined, their workday routine was divided into “reveille, rising, the morning muster, daytime and nighttime work routines, roll call for the prisoners and staff,

¹⁴ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, 70.

¹⁵ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, 70.

¹⁶ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, 70.

¹⁷ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, 71.

¹⁸ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, 77.

¹⁹ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, 77.

and finally, the end of the workday.”²⁰ Even their personal leisure time was strictly regulated. This was subject to their mealtimes, recreation, and permissions to leave the camp facility grounds.²¹ Despite a regulated schedule employment as an *Aufseherinnen* was an appealing option for women, especially lower class, unskilled, and young women at the end of the 1930s. It afforded them new opportunities for friendship, financial independence, and allowed them to meet potential husbands. It can be concluded that their support of the regime stemmed from the opportunities they may not have received otherwise.

1.2 Historiography

Despite recent interest in them, German women have traditionally been underrepresented in studies of active participants in the Third Reich. The first publication to focus on women in Nazi society was published by a Clifford Kirkpatrick, a professor of sociology, in 1938. Kirkpatrick had spent a year between 1936 and 1937 in Nazi Germany researching the status of women and familial expectations in Nazi German society.²² Through his eleven-chapter monograph, Kirkpatrick sought to address issues present within American media coverage of women in Nazi Germany. This included the image of *Sturmabteilung* (paramilitary Storm Troopers or Brown Shirts) removing German women out of office spaces and sequestering them back into the domestic sphere, thereby forcing motherhood onto them. Further, American propaganda hyperfixated on the sanctioned birth of illegitimate children by the Nazi party and the belief

²⁰ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, 84.

²¹ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, 84.

²² Clifford Kirkpatrick, *Nazi Germany: It's Women and Family Life*, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1938), 19.

that Germany would soon devolve into a polygamist state.²³ Although his manuscript was a sociological investigation, Kirkpatrick's research was utilized by historians as a first-hand interpretation of women's lives under National Socialism – a primary account that remained influential in the decade to follow.

Interest in women and the Third Reich did not resurface again until the 1970s when historian Jill Stephenson published her work *Women in Nazi Society* in 1975.

Stephenson's research sought to “describe and discuss some aspects of the status of, and opportunities for, women in Germany” in the 1930s, and to examine the impact of the economic crisis in Germany between 1930 and 1940.²⁴ Her manuscript made significant contributions to the development of the historiography of women and Nazi Germany, particularly concerning her research on women's employment opportunities during this period.²⁵ Throughout chapters four and five, Stephenson concluded that while the Nazi regime needed women to work in war-centered industries throughout the 1930s, their long-term objective was for German women to be full-time housewives once the “German nation had achieved its ‘rightful’ place in the world.”²⁶

Throughout the rest of the 1970s and into the early 1980s, historical research on women in Germany during the Third Reich remained focused on the repressive National Socialist policies regarding motherhood and employment. In 1976, labour historian Tim Mason published an article entitled “Women in Germany, 1925-1940: Family, Welfare and Work. Part 1,” which examined the Nazi government's pronatalist agenda. Mason's primary focus was on the policies of the 1930s which targeted predominantly middle-

²³ Kirkpatrick, *Nazi Germany*, 36.

²⁴ Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Society*, (London: Routledge, 1975), 1.

²⁵ See chapters four and five in Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Society*, 75-115.

²⁶ Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Society*, 110.

class women to “be sensible to their duty to the race and to produce large numbers of healthy and intelligent children.”²⁷ Simultaneously, the Nazi government enacted procedures which sought to prevent women, especially married women, from entering the German workforce.²⁸

Despite the growing interest and examination of women in the labour force in Nazi Germany throughout the 1970s, there remains a significant gap in the historiography. Insufficient attention has been paid to women’s employment in war work, especially those whose work also made them perpetrators of National Socialist crimes, namely the *Aufseherinnen*. Stephenson provided some examination of women’s labour during the war with her 1982 article, “Women’s Labor Service in Nazi Germany”; however, her primary focus was on the Labor Service (*Reichsarbeitsdienst* or *RAD*), which was overseen by the Ministry of the Interior. The Labor Service was “a scheme in which young men and women spent between three months to a year working on community projects – on roads, farms, [and] canals.”²⁹ Historian Elizabeth Harvey provided further examination of the RAD and expanded her examination to include women’s involvement in the “occupation apparatus in the ‘East’.”³⁰ In contrast to Stephenson, Harvey questioned how far German women in the Nazi ‘East’ were “expected to witness violence” arguing that while they operated in the same world as men, because of their occupations women had “available to them a comforting myth of a womanly sphere of

²⁷ Tim Mason, “Women in Germany, 1925-1940: Family, Welfare and Work. Part 1,” *History Workshop* no.1 (Spring 1976), 91.

²⁸ Mason, “Women in Germany,” 91.

²⁹ Jill Stephenson, “Women’s Labor Service in Nazi Germany,” *Central European History* 15 no.3 (Sept. 1982), 242.

³⁰ Elizabeth Harvey, “‘We Forgot all the Jews and Poles’: German Women and the ‘Ethnic Struggle’ in Nazi-occupied Poland,” *Contemporary European History* 10 no.3 (Nov. 2001), 449.

action.”³¹ This allowed them to remove themselves from the violence enacted against the non-German population more so than the men could.³² Despite Stephenson and Harvey’s focus on female employment, there remained an historiographical gap within the labor history of Nazi Germany which examined female concentration camp guards within its umbrella of research. This gendered labour analysis was relatively untouched by scholars until Mailänder published *Female SS Guards* in 2015. Her ground-breaking work recentered the lives of the *Aufseherinnen* not only within the Majdanek concentration camp but also within the historiography. Only in 2015 did this gap begin to close. Female SS guards differ from other women’s occupations in the Nazi regime because while they did not work within the killing centres they were directly involved with genocidal violence, a role not typically coded as feminine. Whereas the *SS-Helferinnen* (female auxiliaries) were arguably more deadly than the camp guards, their desk jobs within the camps afforded them the ability to maintain their femininity.³³ Having encompassed over 3,700 women, the female SS auxiliaries are integral to creating a complete image of female employment in the National Socialist state.

1.2.1 Koonz, Bock, and the Historikerinnenstreit

In the 1980s, Anglo-American historians sought to recenter the focus on women’s participation in the Nazi state. Richard J. Evans’ article “German Women and the Triumph of Hitler” was instrumental in its gendered analysis of Nazi women as active participants in the historical narrative of the Holocaust. Evans recenters “ordinary” women in the political history of Germany through his examination of their role in the

³¹ Harvey, “We Forgot all the Jews,” 461.

³² Harvey, “We Forgot all the Jews,” 461.

³³ The *SS-Helferinnenkorps* were another group of female auxiliaries employed under the SS. They were created as a direct support for the *Waffen-SS* in various offices and headquarters.

1932-33 electoral process - an historical footnote traditionally reserved for men.³⁴

However, despite Evans' efforts to bring women into the folds of the larger Nazi narrative, they were not fully examined as active participants in the historiography of the regime until the 1990s.

The newfound focus on the women's experiences of the violence of the war and war's end drew heavily on wartime oral histories.³⁵ As a result, feminist scholars "illuminated counter-memories specific to women."³⁶ By the end of the 1980's, feminist scholars pushed back against histories that described German women in binary terms as either victims or heroines. Intensified by English-speaking feminist historians, new details around female complicity emerged.³⁷ By the 1990's, historians of the Third Reich and German women began to examine not just everyday women's experiences but explicit discussion of women's roles as themselves perpetrators of National Socialist violence. This shift was not without conflict, however. This historiographical turn resulted in the *Historikerinnenstreit* – the so-called female historians' debate - of the 1980s.³⁸ Scholars debated the "role of women in the Third Reich and pivoted on the central question of whether and to what extent women had independent agency within the male-dominated dictatorship that was Nazi Germany."³⁹ The central scholars within the debate were

³⁴ Richard J. Evans, "German Women and the Triumph of Hitler," *The Journal of Modern History* 48 no.1 (March 1976), 124.

³⁵ Elizabeth Heineman, "The Hour of the Woman: Memories of Germany's "Crisis Years" and West German National Identity," *The American Historical Review* (April 1996), 389.

³⁶ Heineman, "The Hour of the Woman," 389.

³⁷ Heineman, "The Hour of the Woman," 392.

³⁸ Christine Nugent, "Remembering, Reflecting, Reckoning: German Women and the Long-Shadow of National Socialism," *Oral History Review* 45, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2018), 105.

³⁹ Nugent, "Remembering, Reflecting, Reckoning," 105.

American historian Claudia Koonz and German historian Gisela Bock, who crafted vastly different portrayals of National Socialist violence and co-existence with the regime.⁴⁰

In 1986, Koonz and Bock both published their research on the roles of women living in the Nazi state. Koonz's book, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* examined German women's role in the making of the Nazi dictatorship and noted their participation in the war effort and resulting genocidal policies. Through their motherly duty, Koonz argued "Nazi women, no less than men, destroyed ethical vision, debased humane traditions, and rendered decent people helpless."⁴¹ As American scholar Atina Grossmann notes, Koonz's assertion of female complicity during the Holocaust disrupted an ongoing German feminist debate surrounding actions and responsibilities of German women operating within the Third Reich.⁴² In contrast, Bock's work on forced sterilization entitled *Zwangssterilisation im Nationalsozialismus. Studien zur Rassenpolitik und Frauenpolitik* maintained the narrative of German women's victimhood during this period.⁴³ Through her examination of the 1933 Sterilization Law and "anti-natalism," Bock argues that "rather than having oppressed and bribed women by 'a cult of motherhood' and exhortations to improve the master race by raising the birth rate," National Socialist population policy "was a profound anti-natalism which potentially victimized all women by threatening their (biological and social) maternal identity."⁴⁴ Interestingly, Koonz and Bock drew their analyses from the everyday life

⁴⁰ Atina Grossmann, "Feminist Debates about Women and National Socialism," *Gender & History* 3 no. 3 (Autumn 1991), 350.

⁴¹ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics*, (London: Routledge, 1986, 17.

⁴² Grossmann, "Feminist Debates," 350.

⁴³ Sheila Faith Weiss, Review of *Zwangssterilisation im Nationalsozialismus. Studien zur Rassenpolitik und Frauenpolitik*, by Gisela Bock, *German Studies Review*, 10 no. 3, (October 1987), 603-04.

⁴⁴ Grossmann, "Feminist Debates," 351.

stories of differing groups of women with Koonz looking at middle-class women and Bock looking at those in the working-classes.⁴⁵ This animated debate between Koonz and Bock was concisely summarized by Grossman: “For Bock the crime of the Nazis was to deny women motherhood and to attack their motherly values; for Koonz it was to instrumentalize motherhood as a mobilizing tool.”⁴⁶ This polarizing debate encouraged further enquiries by historians into women’s public and private roles in supporting the Nazi regime.

1.2.2. Women as Perpetrators under National Socialism

When scholars turned their attention to a close-range gender analysis of women’s involvement in genocide, their initial examinations tended to focus on two highly publicized German women: SS guard Irma Grese and SS wife Ilse Koch. In the years following the Second World War and the Holocaust, journalists latched on to Grese and Koch – two of the more violent case studies within Holocaust historiography – thereby formulating the image of the ‘Nazi woman perpetrator.’ In 1996, Daniel Patrick Brown published one of the first comprehensive works on the life and career of an *Aufseherinnen*.⁴⁷ Entitled, *The Beautiful Beast: The Life and Crimes of Irma Grese*, Brown traced Grese’s life from childhood into adulthood. The book unearthed her abusive relationship with her father and examined her training in the Hohenlychen Sanatorium in Lychen, Germany and her subsequent employment in the Ravensbrück, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Bergen-Belsen camps. *The Beautiful Beast* also examined

⁴⁵ Grossmann, “Feminist Debates,” 354.

⁴⁶ Grossmann, “Feminist Debates,” 352.

⁴⁷ *SS-Aufseherin* directly translated is female overseer. This was the official title of the women who worked as concentration camp guards.

Grese's sexual relationship with Dr. Josef Mengele. Brown argues that Grese's alleged sexual exploits were too 'abnormal' for Mengele which resulted in the termination of their relationship. Brown posits that her rumored homosexual interactions with German female prisoners and "inferior races" within the camp was the cause of Mengele's and Grese's separation.⁴⁸ Brown's 1996 book represents a critical turning point within the historical discipline towards a gender-inclusive history of Nazi perpetrators, while simultaneously resting on the assumptions around female participation in the regime.

In the decade prior to the publication of Brown's manuscript, American author, and playwright Jay Robert Nash published an extensive encyclopaedia on deviant, disruptive, and dangerous women from the Elizabethan era up until the 1980s when the work was published. Included within this encyclopaedia were biographies on Irma Grese and Ilse Koch. Both entries draw particular attention to Grese and Koch's perceived 'deviancy.' In describing Grese, Nash stated: "when in absolute charge of more than thirty thousand helpless female prisoners at Auschwitz, [she] manifested her sexual urges in the form of the most bestial sadism and killings committed by any woman in this century."⁴⁹ Nash's emphasis on Grese's abnormal criminality compared to any other *woman* (rather than any other *person*) demonstrates the peculiarity of these actions being enacted by a woman rather than a man. Nash further notes Grese's deviancy in his description of her daily morning routine. He outlined how she "dressed in her man's SS uniform, slipping on heavy hobnailed boots."⁵⁰ Outlining her sexual excesses and the fact

⁴⁸ Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Beautiful Beast: The Life and Crimes of Irma Grese*, (Venture, Calif: Golden West Historical Publications, 1996), 47-8.

⁴⁹ Jay Robert Nash, *Look for the Woman: a Narrative Encyclopedia of Female Poisoners, Kidnappers, Thieves, Extortionists, Terrorists, Swindlers, and Spies from Elizabethan Times to the Present*, (New York: M Evans & Co., 1981), 173.

⁵⁰ Nash, *Look for the Woman*, 173.

that she dresses in a *man's* uniform rather than a standard issued uniform, Nash drew a direct connection to women guards and masculinity; Grese, along with other *Aufseherinnen*, are no longer imaginable as women in the heteropatriarchal sense. Their political intransigence is sutured to their transgressing of gender boundaries as well.

Nash's encyclopedia draws similar conclusions in his discussion of Ilse Koch. Entitled *Look for the Woman*, Nash's entry on Koch focused on her rumoured affairs with junior officers under her husband's command. Her spouse, Karl Otto Koch, was the camp commandant of Buchenwald. Nash emphasized that Koch's "appetite for sex was insatiable, and her desire for perversion and sadistic acts obsessive."⁵¹ The intentional word choice used in both biographies is reminiscent of post-war depictions of Nazi women perpetrators, which will be discussed in chapter three. Words such as 'sadistic,' 'perversion,' and 'bestial sadism' reflect the continuation and reinforcement of the 'deviant' narrative in collective memory.

On both sides of the Atlantic, female perpetratorship in the Nazi regime received more substantial attention in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Historian Wendy Lower's 2013 publication, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, brought to light a more nuanced and realistic examination of Nazi women perpetrators. Lower's analysis revealed the role of teachers, nurses, secretaries, social workers, and SS-wives in the Germanization of the Nazi occupied east.⁵² Working in the eastern territories provided more opportunities for professional and personal advancement that young German women were eager to take advantage of. Emphasizing

⁵¹ Nash, *Look for the Woman*, 228.

⁵² Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies, German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, (First Mariner Books: New York, 2014), 23-24.

the “ordinariness” of these women, Lower argues that those who “seemed the least likely to perpetrate the Holocaust’s horrors became the most entangled and involved.”⁵³ A significant contribution to the history of female perpetratorship, *Hitler’s Furies* concludes with Lower’s statement that “the collage of stories and memories, of cruelty and courage, while continuing to test our comprehension of history and humanity, helps us to see what human beings – not only men, but women as well – are capable of believing and doing.”⁵⁴ Unfortunately, however, *Hitler’s Furies* provides no examination of female concentration camp guards leaving more questions rather than answers for historians about this segment of the workforce.

In contrast to Lower, Mailänder’s monograph provides a direct examination of select *Aufseherinnen*. Using the Majdanek concentration camp as her analytical backdrop, Mailänder examines the gender dynamics between camp staff and how it impacted SS women’s capacity for violence. She argues that the “twenty-eight *SS-Aufseherinnen* who worked at Majdanek between fall 1942 and spring 1944 were not, to use Karin Orth’s words, ‘born experts of terror.’ Rather, they became violent within the context of a very specific institutional and sociocultural setting.”⁵⁵ Integral to the book’s argument is the theorized interconnectivity between violence and cruelty. Mailänder posits that cruelty is a more extreme form of violence in which the victim is “defiled and vilified before the eyes of the perpetrator.”⁵⁶ Mailänder’s examination was instrumental in challenging the link in the literature between hypermasculinity and female guards and instead asked

⁵³ Lower, *Hitler’s Furies*, 24-25.

⁵⁴ Lower, *Hitler’s Furies*, 218-219.

⁵⁵ Elissa Mailänder, *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: The Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942-1944*, translated by Patricia Szobar, (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2015), 273.

⁵⁶ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence*, 12.

historians to (re)consider their violence (and possibly their masculinity), as something that emerged in the sociocultural setting of the concentration camps themselves.

Although both Lower and Mailänder have made significant contributions to the history of women, labour, Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, there remain significant gaps within the historiography. While historians have established that German women were both “ordinary” and had the capability to be violent, there has been no dedicated examination of the multitude of women who were employed as *Aufseherinnen*. My research is a beginning attempt to fill this gap within the historiography. I argue that not only were female concentration camp guards’ “ordinary” German women who had the capacity to be violent, as Lower and Mailänder have argued, but that the *Aufseherinnen* were a diverse group of women with varying personalities, identities, and relationships which further complicates the historical understandings of women perpetrators.

1.2.3 Historiography of Film and Popular Culture

There have been several studies examining the sexual exploitation of Nazi women in popular culture. Historians have compiled and compared the depictions of women guards in films such as *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS*, *The Reader* (both the film and the novel), and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* and how these characters have reinforced notions of female ‘deviancy’.⁵⁷ The edited volume *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture* provided the most detailed analysis of the

⁵⁷ Adam Brown’s “Screening Women’s Complicity in the Holocaust: The Problems of Judgement and Representation,” *Holocaust Studies* 17 no. 2-3 (2011), 75-98.; Antony Rowland’s “Reading the Female Perpetrator,” *Holocaust Studies* 17 no.2-3 (2011), 145-161.; Lynn Rapaport’s “Holocaust Pornography: Profaning the Sacred in *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*,” *Shofar* 22 no. 1(Fall 2003), 53-79.; Stacy Banwell and Michael Fiddler’s “Gendered Viewing Strategies: a Critique of Holocaust-related Films that Eroticize, Monsterize and Fetishize the Female Body,” *Holocaust Studies* 24, no. 2 (2018), 150-171.; Sabine Elisabeth Aretz’s “Sexualization of Female Perpetration in Fictional Holocaust Films: A Case Study of *the Reader* (2008),” *Genealogy* 52 no.3 (2019).

sensationalized and sexualized images of Nazi perpetrators within film, video games, and even comic-strips.⁵⁸ Nazisploitation, as historian Daniel Magilow highlighted, “relied more on sensationalistic tag lines and sexually provocative marketing to lure audiences into theatres rather than on aesthetic quality or a compelling narrative.”⁵⁹ While the Nazi exploitation films could be categorically classified as slasher films, the movie posters marketed them closer to pornographic films.⁶⁰ The various essays in *Nazisploitation!* provide an intriguing and comprehensive examination of the sexually sadistic and deviant Nazi woman within popular culture.

Other studies that focus on depictions of Nazi women perpetrators in film have looked at ways in which the medium can be used to move “beyond voyeuristic tendencies and [represent] those responsible for the Holocaust in a [more] nuanced manner.”⁶¹ Scholar Adam Brown does this in his article “Screening Women’s Complicity in the Holocaust: The Problems of Judgement and Representation” by examining representations of Nazi women perpetrators in a variety of Holocaust films such as *Ilsa She-Wolf of the SS*, *Seven Beauties* (1975), *Playing for Time* (1980), *Sophie’s Choice* (1982), *the Devil’s Arithmetic* (2004), and *The Reader* (2008).⁶² Brown’s analysis of the portrayals of women perpetrators within these films emphasized that the “patriarchal perspectives on women’s participation in Nazi genocide” which are “often reliant on

⁵⁸ Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt and Elizabeth Bridges’ *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012).

⁵⁹ Daniel H. Magilow, “Introduction: Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture,” in *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture* edited by Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt and Elizabeth Bridges (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 2.

⁶⁰ Magilow, “Introduction,” 4.

⁶¹ Adam Brown, “Screening Women’s Complicity in the Holocaust: The Problems of Judgment and Representation,” *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 17 no. 2-3 (Autumn/Winter 2012), 76.

⁶² Brown, “Screening Women’s Complicity,” 83-89.

simplistic conceptions of evil, detract from attempts to comprehend their behaviour.” He argues that filmmakers play an important role in “mediating perpetrator experiences” and exhibit a “nuanced approach to representing the complexities of women’s complicity in the Holocaust.”⁶³

Literary scholar Audrey Brunetaux takes a similar approach to Brown in her examination of Stephen Daldry’s depiction of Hanna Schmitz in the 2008 film *the Reader*. “*Mise-en-scène, Aesthetics and the Shoah: the Ambiguous Portrayal of the Female Perpetrator in The Reader*” argues that while Daldry’s film “approaches the female character through her humanness or her female attributes” rather than “pointing right away to her actions during the war” it does not “simplify or dilute the complexities of the Holocaust.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, Brunetaux emphasizes that while visual representations of the Holocaust are imperfect they create an awareness and interest among the public that might not be there otherwise.⁶⁵

Despite the growing literature examining representations of Nazi women perpetrators within popular culture few studies have analysed the *origins* of the relationship between female deviancy and *Aufseherinnen* within collective memory. Chapter three examines public discussions immediately following the Second World War on Nazi women perpetrators demonstrating their legacy of deviancy.

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 *Alltagsgeschichte*

⁶³ Brown, “Screening Women’s Complicity,” 93.

⁶⁴ Brunetaux, “*Mise-en-scène*,” 116, 125.

⁶⁵ Brunetaux, “*Mise-en-scène*,” 125.

Following the work of Alf Lüdtke, this study uses an everyday life approach (*Alltagsgeschichte*) to access the nuanced identities of, and complicate our preconceptions towards, the *Aufseherinnen*. *Alltagsgeschichte*, or the history of everyday life, is centered on the “actions and sufferings of those who are frequently labeled every day, ordinary people.”⁶⁶ The study of ‘everyday life’ during the Nazi period has given agency to the average German living in the Third Reich and has enabled historians to examine not just Nazi policy but the lived experience of the larger populous under this regime.⁶⁷ *Alltagsgeschichte* as a methodological tool provides a more nuanced understanding of the lives of Nazi perpetrators by encouraging historians to shift their gaze from Hitler, Himmler and Goebbels, to the “ordinary” Germans working at ground level as accomplices. Thus, using a micro-analytical approach in this study offers insight into the lived experiences of the *Aufseherinnen*.

The history of everyday life as an analytical tool examines more than just daily routines. As explained by Mailänder, it encompasses the “sphere of work, leisure, living conditions, food, sexuality, and socialization; spheres that we might not immediately associate with concentrations camps, violence, and genocide.”⁶⁸ When examining the workaday experiences of women guards, these “spheres” become exceptionally important as they greatly impact how Nazi women have been perceived within collective memory. Therefore, in using *Alltagsgeschichte*, this study further complicates public understanding

⁶⁶ Alf Lüdtke, “Introduction: What is the History of Everyday Life and Who are its Practitioners?” *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3.

⁶⁷ Lüdtke, “Introduction,” 4.

⁶⁸ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, 7.

of the Nazi camps, violence, and genocide by exploring the lives of the *Aufseherinnen* through these spheres.

1.3.2 Gender Performance and Protean Femininity

Part of this everyday life approach is the use of gender as an analytical tool for understanding pre-conceived notions of female deviancy as it relates to women guards. I use the term ‘gender’ to differentiate between the performative acts of the hetero-normative male Nazi perpetrator and the female Nazi perpetrator. In 1988, Judith Butler argued that “as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. [...] those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished.”⁶⁹ Since they worked in a typically masculine and often violent occupation, women overseers created societal discomfort by stepping outside their accepted role within larger society. Thus, in deconstructing current notions of deviancy this study considers how their gender directly influenced post-war images of Nazi women perpetrators.

Inspired by Thomas Kühne’s examination of the hegemonic and protean masculinity of Wehrmacht soldiers, this study suggests that a protean femininity needs to be considered for women SS guards. Protean masculinity examines the way in which soldiers, once they achieved the norm of “hard manliness,” were able to display “femininely coded affection, tenderness, empathy, caring, and tolerance” in “emotional breakdowns and moments of weakness.”⁷⁰ While the Wehrmacht soldier was able to achieve protean masculinity, I suggest that the female SS guard’s gender identity was protean in nature, meaning, that, in those particular spaces of perpetration, to co-exist

⁶⁹ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40 no. 4 (Dec. 1988), 522.

⁷⁰ Thomas Kühne, “Protean Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity: Soldiers in the Third Reich,” *Central European History* 51 (2018), 418.

with their male counterparts, women guards needed to exhibit a diverse and fluid femininity. Approaching the *Aufseherinnen* with a gendered lens further complicates our understanding of them by acknowledging the co-existence of various gender and sexual identities in a single person. I further argue that ‘performative acts’ undertaken by the *Aufseherinnen* were dependent on the company they were in, such as camp prisoners, SS men, or other women guards. Furthermore, while this is true for most people engaged in society, the *Aufseherinnen* have not been afforded the space to exist within this fluid performance and have been confined to the rigid conceptions of masculinity throughout the majority, if not all, of their interactions. Thus, in moving beyond the ‘Deviant Woman’ narrative it is important to comment directly on how and why they would perform differently in different settings.

1.3.3. Memory and Coming to Terms with the Nazi Past

Memories play an important role in how female perpetrators and their crimes are remembered. The construction of these memories, as Jonathan Dunnage has argued, feeds “directly into, and are conditioned by, public debates relating to national/group identities, cultures, and histories.”⁷¹ In addition, historian Steven Schrag has outlined how memories are “one of the most fundamental concepts of human identity [...] it is a process of narrating and making sense of experience, of storage and recovery, at both individual and collective levels.”⁷² These ideas are integral to analysing post-war public memory of German women as perpetrators, particularly the female SS guards. Following 1945, German women viewed themselves as victims and/or heroes, and rarely as co-

⁷¹ Jonathan Dunnage, “Perpetrator Memory and Memory about Perpetrators,” *Memory Studies* 3 no. 2(2010), 91.

⁷² Steven Schrag, “Memory,” in *Digital Keywords: A Vocabulary of Information Society and Culture* edited by Benjamin Peters (Princeton University Press, 2016) <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctvet0023.23>, 206.

perpetrators in the violence of the Third Reich. Memories of the *Trümmerfrau*⁷³ [woman of the rubble] and the rape of many German women by Soviet troops shaped these perceptions, which, as historian Elizabeth Heineman demonstrated, played a crucial role in the development of their post-war identity, particularly in West Germany.⁷⁴ These images persisted throughout the Cold War as the Federal Republics' (FRG) attempted to come to terms with their Nazi past. The victim identity and “rags-to-riches” story of the *Trümmerfrau*, as Heineman puts it, appealed to the political climate of the FRG in the early years of the Cold War.⁷⁵ The female experience was appropriated as the national experience. Because female complicity in the years immediately following the Second World War did not fit the national narrative or West Germany's attempt to come to terms with their recent past German women who did work for and uphold the murderous regime were removed from discussions of the overall female experience of the war and relegated to masculinity and deviancy.

Critical to this study is how images affect how we remember, which, as historian Barbie Zelizer notes is “powerfully different from how we might remember the same event were images not involved.”⁷⁶ Early sources of public memory formation surrounding female Nazi perpetrators emphasized a distinct group of women through selective written and visual sources. As will be demonstrated in chapter three, journalists employed selective language to depict female guards and SS wives as different from other women in society. Furthermore, images taken by liberating soldiers and court

⁷³ The women of the rubble helped clear debris from the bombed cities after the Second World War.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Heineman, “The Hour of the Woman: Memories of Germany's “Crisis Years” and West German National Identity,” *American Historical Review* vol. 101, no. 2, (April 1996), 355.

⁷⁵ Heineman, “The Hour of the Woman,” 394.

⁷⁶ Barbie Zelizer, “The Voice of the Visual in Memory,” in *Framing Public Memory* edited by Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 158.

photographers dominated popular media. This controlled which images would affect collective interpretations and memories of Holocaust events and perpetrators. Images and photographs, as Zelizer highlighted, “aid the recall of things and events past so effectively that photographs become the primary markers of memory itself.”⁷⁷ With this in mind, part of this thesis re-examines photographs taken during the liberation of the concentration and extermination camps with consideration for the reasoning behind these photos in that they were intended to act as proof of Nazi atrocities. However, rather than employ the photographs as proof that women participated in Nazi crimes, I ask how these images depict the *Aufseherinnen* and what they can tell us about the individuals depicted. By engaging with public memory in this way this thesis aims to offer ways to move the public narrative of Nazi women perpetrators forward.

1.4 Source Materials

My analysis relies heavily on visual evidence from both the war period and immediately following the fall of the Third Reich. This evidence will further complicate female SS guards within the historical narrative. Photographs, as Elizabeth Harvey and Maiken Umbach have noted “form powerful frames through which we historians represent the past to ourselves and to our audiences.”⁷⁸ Historical images are typically used as supplementary material within historical works rather than as standalone sources.⁷⁹ In combatting this tendency, I engage directly with Holocaust photography as a source for historical analysis. I look to photographs to discern the complex identities of

⁷⁷ Zelizer, “The Voice of the Visual in Memory,” 160.

⁷⁸ Elizabeth Harvey and Maiken Umbach, “Introduction: Photography and Twentieth-Century History,” *Central European History* 48 (2015), 287.

⁷⁹ Harvey and Umbach, “Introduction,” 287.

Nazi women. What can their physicality, dress, and facial cues tell us about the *Aufseherinnen* on both an individual and collective level? Is their “performance” affected by the other individuals within the photographs? Or by the individual behind the camera?

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s online collection holds the Hoecker Album, a collection of 166 photographs taken during the last six months of Auschwitz, between June 1944 and January 1945.⁸⁰ These photographs depict employees from Auschwitz-Birkenau camp vacationing at a retreat nearby. These images are an invaluable resource to historians and facilitate further examination into the intersections between leisure and the workaday lives of Nazi perpetrators.

In addition to the Hoecker photographs, I utilize images taken by camp liberators and photojournalists following the end of the war. These images provide a unique lens into what liberators witnessed upon their arrival within the camps. Furthermore, they document the *Aufseherinnen* within their workspace, a perspective typically found in trial testimony and survivor memoirs. In using images as an historical source, it was important to also consider the individuals behind the camera as well as the context in which each photograph was taken. There is a notable disparity between the photographs taken by SS colleagues and those taken by liberating soldiers. This tension can reveal how the *Aufseherinnen* conducted themselves in varying settings.

Post-war newspapers from allied countries are used in combination with Holocaust photography to demonstrate how images can be used to complicate the notions of female ‘deviancy’ within public memory. I examined Western Allied newspapers

⁸⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Albums (Hoecker), <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1166306>.

between 1945 and 1968, to trace public discussions of *Aufseherin* Irma Grese and SS-wife Ilsa Koch, and how they came to be seen as ‘sadistic’, ‘promiscuous’, and ‘deviant’.

1.5 Chapter Breakdown

Following the introduction, the second chapter titled “Photographing the Feminine – SS Women during the War,” examines photographic depictions of female concentration camp staff from Auschwitz-Birkenau during the summer of 1944. Inspired by Thomas Kühne, this chapter argues that female SS guards inhabited a protean femininity which allowed them to exist both inside and outside of the camp system. This fluidity is analysed through a series of four images from the Hoecker album. While the women in the photographs are part of the *Helferrinnenkorps* (volunteer auxiliaries for the SS) and not members of the female guard staff the Hoecker photographs remain a useful source for questioning various aspects of the workaday lives of the *Aufseherinnen*. This chapter examines the various ways in which the women represent themselves, leading to questions regarding the *Helferinnen*’s roles as mothers, and their friendships – allowing us to ask similar questions about the *Aufseherinnen*.

Chapter 3, “Photographing the Feminine – *Aufseherinnen* during Liberation,” traces early memory formations of the “Deviant Nazi Woman” by examining newspaper articles from Canada, the United States, and Britain. Comparing discourse on Irma Grese and Ilsa Koch I argue that Nazi women perpetrators came to be seen as deviant through their (un)attractive appearances – and subsequently were distanced from their femininity in differing ways. The focus shifts in the latter half of the chapter to Holocaust photographs taken by liberating forces. In analysing these images this chapter further

argues that we can use Holocaust photography to expand beyond notions of deviancy depicted in post-war newspapers.

The final chapter, “the ‘Deviant’ *Aufseherinnen* in Popular Culture,” briefly outlines depictions of the *Aufseherinnen* in the pop culture films *Ilse: She-Wolf of the SS* and *The Reader*. Providing an overview of both films, the fourth chapter traces the continuities and changes in public portrayals of Nazi women perpetrators. While female guards are depicted as sexually deviant in both films, *the Reader* illuminates a shift to a more humanistic portrayal of the *Aufseherinnen*.

By employing a micro historical and gendered analysis of visual sources to trace representations of female Nazi concentration camp personnel, this thesis will demonstrate the utility of Holocaust photography in expanding conceptions of women perpetrators, particularly the *SS-Aufseherinnen*. In so doing, we can examine the intersections between friendship, motherhood, and work as it relates to female guards. Furthermore, this thesis traces the continuation of the ‘Deviant Nazi Woman’ within public memory from the late 1940s to 2018 and suggests how we can examine photographs in a way that moves beyond this one-dimensional caricature allowing for further discussion on how we can employ these sources to expand public knowledge.

Chapter 2: Photographing the Feminine - SS Women during the War

In examining the act of soldiering among men in the Wehrmacht during the Third Reich, Thomas Kühne argued that soldiering provided an opportunity for German men to achieve what Kühne described as “hard” manliness, which allowed them to adopt traits and behaviours typically coded as feminine *without* undermining their manliness.⁸¹ At its core, “Protean Masculinity” demonstrated the intersectional relationship between gender fluidity and hegemonic masculinity. Employing photographic sources, Kühne complicated the understanding of the Wehrmacht during the Second World War. His most striking piece of evidence was the private photo of *Obersturmführer* Walter Hauck pushing a baby carriage [see Figure 3].⁸² Hauck was captured gazing lovingly down at his child while wearing his official SS uniform. The image depicts Hauck both as “a soldier *and* father, yet in an obviously feminine role.”⁸³ Although this activity was formally banned by Nazi stormtroopers, Hauck often included this image in a larger collection which he showed to his comrades.⁸⁴ In using this particular image, Kühne demonstrated that the “code of manliness in Nazi Germany was not as unambiguous as it might seem to modern observers.”⁸⁵

⁸¹Kühne, “Protean Masculinity,” 390.

⁸² See Thomas Kühne “Protean Masculinity,” Fig. 2, 392.

⁸³ Kühne, “Protean Masculinity,” 393.

⁸⁴ Kühne, “Protean Masculinity,” 393

⁸⁵ Kühne, “Protean Masculinity,” 393.



*Figure 3 Private photograph from the early 1940s of SS Obersturmführer Walter Hauck as a father. Source: Thomas Kühne, "Protean Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity: Soldiers in the Third Reich," *Central European History* 51 (2018), 392.*

Inspired by Kühne's analysis, this chapter questions the relationship between gender fluidity and Nazi women perpetrators. Examining Nazi women's gender performance in relation to gender fluidity - just as Kühne did with Wehrmacht soldiers - allows historians to broaden and challenge notions of 'inherent masculinity' within female perpetrators. I examined Holocaust photographs from the album of SS-*Obersturmführer* Karl Hoecker, the adjutant to the commandant of Auschwitz, to illustrate the advantages in applying visual culture to explore divergent gender identities amongst Nazi women. These images depict female auxiliaries at the SS retreat in

Solahütte. Built by prisoners of the Auschwitz concentration camp, Solahütte was a recreational resort located 30 kilometres south of the camp complex.⁸⁶ The Solahütte photos showcase Nazi women in a leisurely setting separated from any visually explicit scenes connecting them to Nazi violence. This chapter examines the tension between the National Socialist genocidal violence and perpetrator leisure photography and what this friction can tell us about the gendered identities of women guards. Inspired by historians Jennifer Evans and Elissa Mailänder, I move beyond seeing images as “simple expressions of fixed and firm gender and sexuality configurations” by examining genocidaires⁸⁷ in divergent settings.⁸⁸ I analyze depictions of motherhood and female friendship present within Holocaust photography to expand the standard characterizations of female concentration camp guards who operated in typically ‘masculine’ roles.

The women pictured in the following photographs worked under the *SS-Helferinnen*. The *Helferinnen* were a relatively small group who worked as support staff and radio operators in the camp communications office.⁸⁹ In contrast to the recruitment of the *SS-Aufseherinnen*, the *Helferinnen* were racially vetted and targeted for their suitability as potential wives of SS officers.⁹⁰ Their employment differed from that of the female guards within the camp system allowing them to maintain their femininity. Nevertheless, their photographic depictions in Holocaust leisure photography allow historians to speculate on what that time and those relationships might have looked like

⁸⁶“Solahütte,” Auschwitz.camp, Kazerne Dossin Memorial, <https://auschwitz.camp/en/traces/solahutte/>.

⁸⁷ The term genocidaires refers to women who participated in genocidal violence in some form or degree.

⁸⁸ Jennifer Evans and Elissa Mailänder, “Cross-dressing, Male Intimacy and Violence of Transgression in Third Reich Photography,” *German History*, 2020; ghaa03, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.carleton.ca/10.1093/gerhis/ghaa031>, 2.

⁸⁹ “The SS Garrison,” Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, <http://auschwitz.org/en/history/the-ss-garrison/>.

⁹⁰ Rachel Century, “Dictating the Holocaust: Female Administrators of the Third Reich,” (PhD diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2012), 39.

for the *Aufseherinnen*. Because there are no known sources depicting the *Aufseherinnen* in leisurely settings, this chapter questions the feminine performances of motherhood and friendship displayed at Solahütte on the part of the *Helferinnen* arguing that we can use images of female concentration camp staff to piece together what the workaday lives of the women guards might have looked like. This complicates the ‘Deviant Woman’ narrative.

Historians are currently in the process of challenging the overly simplified narratives surrounding women, gender, sexuality, and violence in Nazi Germany. As mentioned in my introductory chapter, historians Wendy Lower and Elissa Mailänder have advanced crucial re-examinations of women and their participation in National Socialist violence. Lower’s *Hitler’s Furies* argues that women who participated in the Germanization programs and violence in Eastern Europe came from simple and ordinary backgrounds. This reveals that there was nothing exceptional or sensational about female SS guards before their entry into the concentration camp system.⁹¹ While Lower argues for the ‘ordinariness’ of Nazi women perpetrators, Mailänder proclaims their capacity for violence after her examination of the everyday life stories of the female SS guards in the Majdanek camp. *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence* theorizes that the twenty-eight *Aufseherinnen* who worked in the Majdanek camp were not “born experts of terror” but rather “became violent within the context of a very specific institutional and sociocultural setting.”⁹² Expanding on the work of both Lower and Mailänder, I argue

⁹¹Wendy Lower, *Hitler’s Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2013), 24-26.

⁹² Elissa Mailänder, *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: The Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942-1944*, (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2015), 273.

that historians need to allow for greater gender fluidity and diversity amongst Nazi women perpetrators in addition to their “ordinariness” and capacity for violence.

Acknowledging differences amongst women perpetrators further requires that scholars question how these women coexisted within a largely male-dominated environment. I argue that not only were female perpetrators a diverse group, but also that there existed moments of fluidity in their gender performances that allowed individual women to fluctuate between masculine and feminine-coded behaviours. These moments were situational. We can speculate that these moments allowed women the space to exist fully as themselves while also sometimes requiring that they go against their identity and perform in an ‘acceptable’ manner. Expanding further on Kühne’s analysis of protean masculinity, this chapter engages with Holocaust images as a tool to interrogate these possible moments of fluidity. Just as Wehrmacht soldiers could fluctuate between masculine and feminine roles, so too could Nazi women perpetrators. However, unlike the soldiers who were *allowed* to participate in feminine roles once they achieved hegemonic masculinity, women were not given the choice to participate in male or female roles but were rather *required* to – meaning that they already possessed a protean femininity.

2.1 Photographs as a Scholarly Source

While there is no question that written documentation provides important insight into both the ordinary lives of the German people and atrocities committed under National Socialism, there is much to be said about the utility of photographic evidence. Historians of modern Germany have employed photographs to explore topics such as

gender and sexuality, tourism and German soldiers, and the everyday lives of ordinary Germans under the Nazi regime.⁹³ Images allow for complex analyses of historical moments. While photographs were often understood to be reflections of “historical periodization,” historian Jennifer Evans highlights their use in “creating modes of seeing multiple, coexisting pasts, often in a state of flux and overlap.”⁹⁴ This is especially evident in leisure photographs taken of female camp staff at Solahütte. A close reading of Figures 4, 5, and 6, demonstrate the intricacies of how life in and outside the camps co-existed, thus illuminating the intersection of genocidal violence and leisure.

Before analysing the photographs below, I feel it is necessary to discuss the challenges in using photography as an historical source. Not only are images subject to manipulation leading to questions of authenticity, but historian Maiken Umbach has noted that they also present historians with “innumerable challenges with respect to interpretation.”⁹⁵ This leaves images open to a wide variety of interpretations. Furthermore, ‘amateur’ snapshots, like the ones taken by Karl Hoecker, do not reveal as much about the period in which they were taken as written sources do because of the nature in which they were taken. Furthermore, the authenticity of the images or the “performance” of the people within them is constantly in question thus limiting their appeal to historical researchers.⁹⁶ The benefits of using photographs for historical

⁹³ See Thomas Kühne’s “Protean Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity: Soldiers in the Third Reich,” Julie S. Torrie’s “Visible Trophies: German Occupiers’ Photographic Perception of France, 1940-44” in *The Ethics of Seeing: Photography and Twentieth-Century Germany*, and Maiken Umbach’s “Selfhood, Place, and Ideology in German Photo Albums, 1933-45.”

⁹⁴ Jennifer Evans, “Introduction: Photography as an Ethics of Seeing,” in *The Ethics of Seeing: Photography and Twentieth Century Germany*, edited by Jennifer V. Evans, Paul Betts, and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, (New York: Berghahn, 2018), 11.

⁹⁵ Maiken Umbach, “Selfhood, Place, and Ideology in German Photo Albums, 1933-1945,” *Central European History* 48 (2015), 336, DOI:10.1017/S0008938915000783.

⁹⁶ Umbach, “Selfhood, Place, and Ideology,” 336.

analysis, however, outweigh the challenges associated with them. As Umbach and Harvey have outlined, photography captures particular “moments or events with greater immediacy and spontaneity than paintings or even film.”⁹⁷ As a result, historians have a unique opportunity to view the everyday lives of “ordinary” people, thus enabling scholars to broaden our knowledge of the past.

2.2. Leisure in Nazi Germany

Pleasure and mass murder in the Third Reich were intricately linked. As Kühne argues, the “pleasure of togetherness and belonging [...] fuelled the genocide” in Nazi Germany.⁹⁸ The National Socialist government stimulated the *Volksgemeinschaft* (peoples community) by encouraging the consumption of German goods and participation in ideologically safe mass tourism.⁹⁹ Shelley Baranowski’s work posits that despite the Nazi governments suspicion of mass consumerism, Hitler “envisioned a future of material abundance once the obtainment of *Lebensraum* (living space) assured Germany’s continental domination and biological survival.”¹⁰⁰ Ten months after Hitler gained power, the Reich founded *Kraft durch Freude* or *KdF* (Strength through Joy) – an organization aimed at bringing the cultural practices of the middle and upper classes to

⁹⁷ Elizabeth Harvey and Maiken Umbach, “Introduction: Photography and Twentieth-Century German History,” *Central European History* 48 (2015), 287.

⁹⁸ Thomas Kühne, “The Pleasure of Terror, belonging through Genocide,” *Pleasure and Power in Nazi Germany*, edited by Corey Ross, Pamela Swett, and Fabrice d’Almeida, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 237.

⁹⁹ Hartmut Berghoff, “Enticement and Deprivation: The Regulation of Consumption in Pre-War Nazi Germany,” *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* edited by Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton (Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001), 172-74.

¹⁰⁰ *Lebensraum* translates into “living space.” The Nazis aimed to expand the Reich into the Eastern Territories to ensure ample space for the ethnically pure German population to grow. Shelley Baranowski, *Strength Through Joy: Consumerism and Mass Tourism in the Third Reich*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.

workers.¹⁰¹ KdF stressed that work and leisure were two sides of the same coin claiming that “after work activities amounted not to the escape from work but its affirmation.”¹⁰² The organization provided working class Germans the freedom to travel – an opportunity not offered under previous governments. Baranowski notes that in 1938 alone, approximately 8.5 million people took part in leisure trips within Germany and German occupied territories, with many repeat travellers.¹⁰³ It is therefore not surprising that the bonded relationship between work and leisure bled into the lives of concentration camp staff.

Leisure continued to be an important aspect of everyday life, even for those Germans who worked in the Nazi concentration camps. The barracks for the *Aufseherinnen* at Ravensbrück, for example, were specifically designed to encourage companionship among the women. It was imperative that women living away from their families were not “to be left alone to their own devices but were to be housed in lodgings that will encourage a sense of community.”¹⁰⁴ Mailänder notes that in the warmer months the *Aufseherinnen* at Ravensbrück went rowing and swimming on Lake Schwedt, went on walks, and took part in the local festivals put on by the marksmen’s associations. In the wintertime, the women guards would go ice skating on the lake, and went on outings to the local pubs, cafés, and cinemas in Fürstenberg.¹⁰⁵ Most of their leisure time, however, was spent in their residences. Each floor of the barracks was equipped with a sewing room where they could sew, crochet, and knit in their downtime.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Baranowski, *Strength through Joy*, 40.

¹⁰² Baranowski, *Strength Through Joy*, 40.

¹⁰³ Baranowski, *Strength Through Joy*, 55.

¹⁰⁴ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, 89.

¹⁰⁵ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, 89.

¹⁰⁶ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*, 90.

2.3. On the Terrace of the Lodge

Pictured below are images of Auschwitz camp staff at the SS retreat at Solahütte located thirty kilometres south of the camp. The photographs depict timeless scenes reminiscent of family vacations. Men, women, and children are pictured enjoying their time away from the mundanity of their everyday routines. Holocaust images come in different forms and take on various meanings depending on the context within which they are being examined.¹⁰⁷ Photographs taken by and of Nazi perpetrators' leisure activities provide a unique window into the intersectionality between masculinity, femininity, everyday life, and genocide.

Photographs do not necessarily reveal a person's identity; however, with contextual knowledge around gender identity and performance we can extrapolate that women camp staff were afforded a space to engage in more feminine roles while at the retreat. With this in mind, it is important to account for those individuals who, even in a more stereotypical female setting, could be performing against their own self-identity. This acknowledgment creates space for feminine, masculine, and queer individuals to exist in current perceptions of Nazi women perpetrators. Written sources about women perpetrators allow for a hyper-fixation on the stereotypically masculine nature of their job which can fuel ideas of visually deviant women. Taking into consideration the potential staging of certain images, photographs allow for an examination of complexities and

¹⁰⁷ Daniel Magilow, "Holocaust Photographs" Online Lectures: Studying Primary Sources from the Holocaust, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://www.ushmm.org/research/opportunities-for-academics/lectures/online>.

intersections in the lives of Holocaust perpetrators. The image below (Figure 1) is particularly illuminating in demonstrating these intersections.

In examining these specific images from the Hoecker album, I was interested in how female staff members were depicted. Most importantly, I questioned what their body language and demeanour could reveal about both their group and individualized identities, and what this, in turn, could tell historians about gender fluidity and the *Aufseherinnen*. Furthermore, examining female perpetrators and leisure in relation to one another conflicts with current pre-conceptions surrounding violent women.



Figure 4 "On the Terrace of the Lodge." Solahütte, [Upper Silesia; Auschwitz] Poland, 1944. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of an anonymous donor.

If the man in the foreground were not wearing a distinct uniform this image would portray any group of friends relaxing at a retreat enjoying fresh air and sunshine. Their reclined body language, faint smiles, and joyful engagement with their surroundings further solidifies this interpretation for the viewer. The figures in the background are perhaps the spectators of a game or simply enjoying nature. The women who are reclined are cozily wrapped in blankets, both to preserve their modesty while in a reclined

position and provide warmth. This photo demonstrates typical gender roles of the mid twentieth century in the position of the legs of the subjects. While the man depicts openness with his knees widely separated, the women depict a closed reserve with ankles crossed and legs pressed together. The man in the foreground and second woman from the right provide the greatest contrast between stereotypically male and female body language. Unlike the other subjects in the picture, they are sitting lower in their chairs and reclined to the same degree as each other. The man exudes confidence with his relaxed body position whereas the woman appears to be holding her body more rigidly.

At first glance, it is an innocent image. However, the context of the photo complicates first impressions. Taken south of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland, this image shows several *SS-Helferinnen* and male SS officers relaxing on the terrace at Solahütte. The photo was taken in the summer of 1944 during which 400,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered at the camp.¹⁰⁸ Identifying who is present in this image, where it was taken, and when it transpired allows us to visually comprehend how leisure and violence coexisted in the lives of concentration camp staff. We must ask, as Mailänder argued “what is the history within the photographs and what are the histories around them?”¹⁰⁹ Examining the body language, head tilts, and facial expressions within leisure photography allows us to consider these questions.

Changing visual perspective, the image in Figure 5 solidifies the continuity of normalcy for camp staff. Not only are SS men and women enjoying the fresh air of the countryside together, but their children are also present. The woman in the foreground

¹⁰⁸ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Event History, “SS Officer Karl Hoecker relaxes with women in lounge chairs on the deck of the retreat in Solahuette,” <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1163584>.

¹⁰⁹ Evans and Mailänder, “Cross-Dressing,” 12.

holding the young child on her lap grabs the viewer's immediate focus. It is the ideal representation of femininity. She appears to be smiling at the child while feeding him fresh berries. It is a nurturing and motherly pose.



Figure 5. SS officers relax together with women and a baby on a deck at Solahütte. 1944. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1163583>.

The two young children on either side of her reinforce the impression that the Solahütte retreat functioned as both a space for camp personnel to relax and could accommodate quality family time. Viewing the woman with her small child raises several questions regarding female perpetratorship and motherhood. Unlike the image of Hauck pushing his infant child, the woman's femininity is reinforced in the above image which contradicts notions of the masculine female perpetrator.

The photographs in Figures 5 and 6 demonstrate the interconnectedness between everyday life and genocide in the Third Reich by showcasing concentration camp staff and their families on vacation. Furthermore, they illustrate the unconscious performance of the masculine and femininely coded behaviours of the SS men and female staff. It can

be argued that the above images reconnect Nazi perpetrators to ideas of ordinariness and normalcy using gendered norms of motherhood to cement the ideal.

2.4. Female Friendships



Figure 6 “Hier gibt es Blaubeeren” (there are blueberries here). Solahuette, Poland. 1944. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of an anonymous donor.

Shifting focus, the above image depicts a group of women who exude femininity with their youthful, jovial closeness. The women in the image appear no older than thirty and convey the sense of familiarity bolstered through comradeship through their body language. Approximately a dozen women are relaxing on the railing as if conjoined at the hip while three men provide fresh blueberries and musical entertainment. The women on the left of the image are anticipating the enjoyment of berries while others savour the sweet and sour flavours with each berry they eat. With no context provided, it is a romantic image. It turns on nostalgia for youthful summers outside and enjoying the fresh fruits of the season with their friends and family. There is nothing evidently performative

about the women's body language beyond connoting friendship. The second woman from the left of the frame is holding the right hand of the third woman in the photo while the third woman has her left arm entwined with the woman to her left. The closeness they exhibit is a familiar visualization of female friendship. They can interreact with one another in a way that men would never be permitted to do in a public setting *because* of their femininity. Acknowledging that the individuals pictured are functionaries from the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp (so-named *Helferinnen* or assistants) reveals a more insidious undertone to this image. At the same time, it provides a visual and commonly normative feminine perspective not typically associated with female camp personnel.¹¹⁰

The interactions between the women in the above image immediately led me to question how Holocaust photography can help us to understand female friendship as it relates to women guards. Until the late twentieth-century, female friendships have had significantly fewer “literary illustrations,” to use the words of Linda Rosenzweig, when compared to male friendship and comradeship.¹¹¹ Furthermore, when female friendship is portrayed, it is framed as being “shallow, insincere, temporary, and insignificant.”¹¹² With limited discussions on female friendship in Holocaust historiography, it is important to comment on their likelihood amongst the *SS-Aufseherinnen*; especially when examining the complexities and diversity within the larger group.

¹¹⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum photograph 34766 “Members of the SS Helferinnen (female auxiliaries) sit on a fence railing in Solahuetten as Karl Hoecker passes out bowls of blueberries. In the background is a man playing accordion.” <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1163642>.

¹¹¹ Linda Rosenzweig, *Another Self: Middle-Class American Women and their Friends in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 2.

¹¹² Rosenzweig, *Another Self*, 2.

Although historians do not have access to sources detailing friendships among *Aufseherinnen*, images of the *Helferinnen* such as the one in Figure 6 provide some hints at what that friendship might have looked like. We cannot know the exact relationships between the individual women. However, through a close examination of their facial expressions it is evident that they enjoy being in each other's company. This is further demonstrated in Figure 7.



Figure 7 Suddenly it started to rain. Nazi officers and female auxiliaries run down a wooden bridge in Solahuette. July 1944. Photograph #34586. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

The women in the above photograph are, presumably, running for shelter after the commencement of the summer rain. Looking at the two women in the bottom left of the image allows us to conclude that at least some of the women formed close bonds with one another. Unfortunately, the current historiography does not facilitate further examination into how these friendships were formed, under what circumstances, and how they progressed throughout their employment. Hopefully, future historiography will take up these questions to seriously investigate how multi-faceted their work and personal

lives were. What we can know is that women camp staff had complex relationships. Interrogating these questions is important for further conceptualizing the ordinariness of SS women's lives while simultaneously working for a murderous regime.

This examination of female friendship amongst women perpetrators has left several unanswered questions such as, how were friendships formed and were they used to escape the violence of their jobs to manufacture pre-war normalcy? What was the relationship between SS wives and female concentration camp employees, particularly as it concerned motherhood?

2.5. Protean Femininity in Photography during the War

In thinking about protean femininity and examining the facial and bodily expressions of the women in the above two photographs, several questions surface regarding the individual identities of Nazi women. How do their emotions draw attention to their differing personalities? How can we assess the varying degrees of gender performativity through photographs? In thinking about these questions, it is important to consider the likelihood that individuals would not be 'performing' within their own self-identity. This allows historians to conduct an inclusive examination of female concentration camp employees so as to further complicate historical and public understandings of female perpetratorship.

Examining the women in Figure 7, it becomes evident that this is a diverse group. While several of the SS auxiliaries begin running for shelter, others remain poised and ready to take the photo. The woman to the right of the image, next to the accordion player, exudes both reactions. While she does not begin to run like the three women in the left of

the image, her expression indicates surprise and possibly amusement from the oncoming rain. Although we cannot decipher exact personalities from the photograph, the three different reactions distinguish the women apart from one another.

The women in Figures 6 and 7 appear to be reacting and behaving organically. However, it is difficult to concretely conclude that the photographs are not staged, or that they are all portraying themselves honestly within the images. Are they acting true to character? Or are they performing in a manner that is expected of them? In considering protean femininity in relation to women perpetrators as a group, we must also consider that their gendered performance fluctuated on an individual level as well. Although we cannot confirm many of the personal identities of Nazi women from photographic evidence, we can conclude that perpetrator leisure photography provides a small window into the individuality of female concentration camp employees.

Holocaust perpetrator's leisure photography allows historians to take up more complex questions surrounding the *SS-Aufseherinnen*, their everyday life experiences, and their individuality. Furthermore, they highlight the intersections between gender, everyday life, and genocide in a manner that is not as yet accessible through written documentation. In a simplified way, the photographs created space for examining femininely coded behaviours not normally associated with women guards such as motherhood and friendship. Despite being left with more questions regarding the workaday lives of female SS guards, I have demonstrated that Holocaust photographs taken by concentration camp staff are a useful source for examining perpetrators of National Socialism.

Chapter 3: Through the eyes of the Victors: *SS-Aufseherinnen* during Liberation

Barbie Zelizer wrote in 1999 that “photographs, both at the time of the liberation of the concentration camps of World War II and in the years since, have been instrumental in helping to interpret Nazi atrocities.”¹¹³ Photography’s central influence in disseminating intelligence on the human conditions of the Holocaust after 1945 was largely a product of the need to establish an authoritative record of what the liberating forces witnessed once they entered the camps.¹¹⁴ This is especially true for narratives surrounding Nazi women perpetrators. As Zelizer notes, female perpetrators were strategically depicted as “harsh, angled, angry, and often maniacal.”¹¹⁵ They were the “antithesis to all that was [subjective] and desired about women’s gendered behaviour in the camps.”¹¹⁶ In the photographs that follow, we can trace how the *SS-Aufseherinnen* were strategically photographed to fuel the ‘Deviant Woman’ narrative. Taken from the *Life Magazine* picture collection and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s online database, Figures 5 through 9 depict the deliberately masculinized women camp guards. While the below images risk reinforcing popularized perceptions of female camp personnel, queering our analysis of the photos allows us to extrapolate on the feminine and queer identifying women without removing those who associated with more masculine attributes.

Photographs taken at Solahütte by friends and colleagues contrast sharply with the photographs taken in the concentration camps by liberation soldiers. While the former

¹¹³ Barbie Zelizer, “From the Image of the Record to the Image of Memory: Holocaust Photography, Then and Now,” in *Picturing the Past: Media, History, and Photography*, edited by Bonnie Brennan and Hanno Hardt, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 117.

¹¹⁴ Zelizer, “From the Image of the Record,” 99.

¹¹⁵ Barbie Zelizer, “Gender and Atrocity: Women in Holocaust Photographs,” in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust* edited by Barbie Zelizer, (London: The Athlone Press, 2001), 252.

¹¹⁶ Zelizer, “Gender and Atrocity,” 252.

depict scenes of leisure making it difficult to determine a concise group identity, the latter taken by liberation soldiers identifies the women as a distinct group that is meant to be understood as “other” by the viewer. In addition, Holocaust liberation photography directly connected the *Aufseherinnen* to the atrocities within Nazi concentration camps. Figures 6 and 8 depict women guards moving the bodies of Holocaust victims. These specific photographs contain sensitive content. However, they allow historians to examine the behaviour of women guards in the immediate aftermath of National Socialist genocide. My intention is not to glorify, sensationalize, or eroticise mass death, but to further understand the complexities of the *Aufseherinnen*.

Liberation photography is unique in the way that it allows historians to examine formations of the ‘Deviant Nazi Woman’ through a visual lens. Examined in conjunction with Western post-war newspapers, we can further analyse how perceived female deviancy was dependant on public ideals surrounding beauty, fashion, mothers, and womanhood. Despite women continually engaging in violence within the “global arena,” Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg have pointed out that “discursively violent women” have been alienated from “both political violence and womanhood” through the narratives of monster, mother, and whore.¹¹⁷ Keeping these narratives in mind, I argue throughout this chapter that the *Aufseherinnen*’s violence against camp inmates came second to their outwardly appearance within public discourse in forming narratives of female ‘masculinity’ and ‘deviancy.’

In her 1988 article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Butler stated that the “body is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that

¹¹⁷ Gentry and Sjoberg, “Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores,” 12.

bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic.”¹¹⁸ In using the term ‘dramatic’, Butler posits that the body is “not merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities.”¹¹⁹ In order to analyse women guards within Holocaust photography, consideration must be given to their bodies; more specifically, the performativity of gender both through facial and bodily expression.

3.1 The Nazi Women Perpetrator in Post-War Public Discourse

Before analyzing the *Aufseherinnen* in liberation photography, I want to examine post-war newspapers and the ways in which public discourse impacted the larger public perception of Nazi women. The title of the photograph in Figure 9, “Some of the SS Girls at Belsen,” is particularly interesting in its reference to youthfulness and girlhood. Emphasizing the age and youthfulness of female perpetrators, particularly the *Aufseherinnen*, was a running theme in immediate post-war discussions of women guards in Britain, Canada, and the United States. The *New York Times*, on the 6 October 1945, published an article covering the Belsen trial entitled: “Belsen Girl Guard Blames all of SS.”¹²⁰ In this article, the journalist is quoting *Aufseherin* Irma Grese’s trial statement, in which she stated that all “members of the SS were equally guilty of murder” likely in an attempt to equalize her liability amongst her fellow male and female SS officers.¹²¹ It is

¹¹⁸Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal* 40 no. 4 (Dec. 1988), 521.

¹¹⁹ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal* 40 no. 4 (Dec. 1988), 521.

¹²⁰“Belsen Girl Guard Blames all of SS,” *The New York Times*, 6 October 1945, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

¹²¹ “Belsen Girl Guard Blames all of SS,” *The New York Times*, 6 October 1945, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

noteworthy that this newspaper article continues to emphasize Grese's outward appearance during a criminal investigation under the laws of war and international law, coining the phrase "blonde Irma" to describe a perpetrator of National Socialist genocide.¹²²

Irma Grese was a single, twenty-two-year-old woman when she was tried by a British military tribunal for war crimes. Her age and attractiveness were continuously emphasized within public discourse, as evidenced throughout several post-war newspapers. In the *Toronto Daily Star*, published on the 18 September 1945, Grese, along with another female guard, Elizabeth Volkenrath, were described as the "two most attractive girls"—presumably amongst the other *SS-Aufseherinnen* on trial—and were portrayed as both having blonde hair which was "neatly curled and waved," along with wearing "neat grey uniforms of the German W.A.C. [Women's Army Corps]"¹²³ Despite a witness describing the above mentioned women as "the cruellest of the lot," this damning declaration was curbed due to the journalist's overemphasis on Volkenrath's and Grese's beauty and wardrobe. On the 16 October 1945, the *Toronto Star* commented that "Blonde Irma Grese" looked "more like a *society fashion model* than an accused murderer and torturer [emphasis mine]."¹²⁴ This article further elaborates on her appearance, specifically her attire, writing: "She stepped smartly to the stand, a *striking figure* in a well-tailored gray suit, pale blue blouse, and sheer silk stockings [emphasis mine]."¹²⁵ This hypersexualized and objectifying post-war discourse likened Grese to the

¹²² "Belsen Girl Guard Blames all of SS," *The New York Times*, 6 October 1945, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

¹²³ "Should Shoot us on Sight," *Toronto Daily Star*, 18 Sept. 1945,

¹²⁴ "Blond Irma, Dressed up on Belsen Stand," *Toronto Star*, 16 October 1945, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Toronto Star.

¹²⁵ "Blond Irma," *Toronto Star*.

“blonde bombshells” of the 1930s and 1940s during the Golden Age of Hollywood. Through this depiction, Grese was romanticised much in the same way prominent film stars Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Bette Davis were during this time. This sensationalized portrayal of Grese’s beauty, figure, and age set her apart not only from “ordinary” German women but also her fellow female guards on trial for crimes against humanity.

In *The Washington Post*, Grese was described as maintaining a “defiant, contemptuous look [during her trial] that marred her *undeniable good looks* [emphasis mine].”¹²⁶ Interestingly, even the wording of Grese looking “contemptuous” and “defiant” is more commonly associated with a rebellious adolescent, and not what one would imagine befitting an adult woman on trial for war crimes. This infantilizing characterization is further substantiated when Grese was labeled as a “Girl Guard,” “Head Girl,” and “Girl Sadist” in *The New York Times*, the *Toronto Daily Star*, and the *Washington Post*, despite being a young adult and a *Oberaufseherin*, the highest-ranking office a woman employed in the concentration camp system could hold.¹²⁷ Applying the term “Head Girl” to Grese is interesting, as its application in the British youth education system denoting a leadership position held by a reputable adolescent girl clashes sharply with Grese’s culpability and active participation through her employment in mass murder. Furthermore, it was recorded that Grese’s “iron calm” gave way to “tears and shouts” after the five-week trial period.¹²⁸ Even Grese’s emotional outburst is described

¹²⁶ “New Horrors pictured at Belsen Trial,” *The Washington Post* 20 Sept. 1945.

¹²⁷ “Belsen Girl Guard Blames all of SS,” *The New York Times*, 6 October 1945, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.; “Mass Murder, I’m Guilty, Belsen Head Girl Admits,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 5 Oct. 1945; “Beast of Belsen, Girl Sadist, Die on Gallows with 9 others,” *Washington Post* 15 Dec. 1945.

¹²⁸ “Belsen Woman guard weeps, denies guilt” *New York Times* 17 Oct. 1945

in similar terminology to that of a childish tantrum. Whether this youthful depiction was intentional or unconsciously done, it conceivably served to undercut the authority and power that Grese held as a *Oberaufseherin* in a public forum.

While Grese was framed in more captivating language (a youthful blonde beauty) other female perpetrators were portrayed as more socially and morally disruptive in their appearance and criminality. Throughout my examination of post-war newspaper articles, a clear polarization emerges between Irma Grese and Ilsa Koch—the SS-wife of Karl Otto Koch. While there is a twenty-year gap between newspaper articles, looking at both sets highlight the continuity in the language employed in public discussions on Nazi women perpetrators. In contrast to “blond Irma,” red-headed Koch was married and was described as “plump” and “once attractive.”¹²⁹ Along with emphasizing Grese’s ‘desirable’ hair colour, she was also nicknamed the “blonde Queen,” and the “Beastress of Belsen.”¹³⁰ In contrast, Koch was nicknamed the “(red) witch of Buchenwald” and the “Mistress of Buchenwald” by several Western newspapers during and after her trial.¹³¹ While the term “witch” has historical notions of wickedness and malevolence, “Beastress” conjures to mind synonymous words such as “mistress” and “temptress”—neither of which are inherently negative but rather suggest sexual undertones. Interestingly, *The Manchester Guardian*, departing from Canadian and American terminology of “witch,” used the word “Mistress” to describe Koch. Mistress doubles as

¹²⁹ “Ilsa Koch hangs herself in cell,” *New York Times* 3 Sept. 1967; “Hunger Strike staged by Ilsa,” *The Washington Post*, 4 Jan. 1951

¹³⁰ “Branded Victims see Beast of Belsen Swing,” *Toronto Star*, 14 Dec. 1945; “Beast of Belsen, 9 Others to Die for Camp Deaths,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 17 Nov. 1945.

¹³¹ “Far too busy for atrocities, says Ilsa as new trial opens,” *The Washington Post*, 28 November 1950; “Ilsa Koch ‘Beast’ Camp Inmate Says,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 3 Jan. 195; “Witch of Buchenwald Sentence Reviewed,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 16 Sept. 1966; “Ilsa Koch Found Dead in Cell,” *The Times*, 4 Sept. 1967.; “Ilsa Koch to be tried for Murder,” *The Manchester Guardian*, 21 Sept. 1949.

both a promiscuous woman having an extramarital affair and a woman in a position of authority.

Moreover, according to the *New York Times*, Koch was described by several sources as being “perverted, nymphomaniacal, hysterical,” a “power-mad demon,” an “incurable moral degenerate,” and “one of the arch-fiends of Nazism.”¹³² Koch alleged that she was only ever indirectly connected to the Buchenwald camp operation through her husband’s employment as a Commandant. In a newspaper article entitled “Far too busy for atrocities,” Koch supposedly stated to the court that she was “merely a housewife” and was too reoccupied in “raising her children to commit the hundreds of crimes with which she is charged with.”¹³³ Her competence as a mother was also challenged, as evidenced in the *New York Times* article on the 3rd of September 1967 in which witnesses attested to Koch’s negligence of her “two children, who were brought up in abject poverty and denied higher education.”¹³⁴ *The Washington Post* on the 28th of November 1950 publicized Koch’s rumoured promiscuity and adultery, using the phrase “one of her lovers” to describe a witness attesting to Koch’s crimes during her trial.¹³⁵ On 30 October 1967, the *New York Times* published an article that reported on the birth of Koch’s illegitimate child while she was incarcerated at Dachau awaiting trial by an American war crimes court.¹³⁶ The journalist noted the death of her husband several years prior, reiterating the illegitimacy of the infant, but failed to discuss the possibility of

¹³² “Ilse Koch hangs herself in cell,” *New York Times* 3 Sept. 1967.; “A Miscarriage of Justice,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 9 Oct. 1948.

¹³³ “Far too busy for atrocities, says Ilse as new trial opens,” *The Washington Post*, 28 November 1950.

¹³⁴ “Ilse Koch hangs herself in cell,” *New York Times* 3 Sept. 1967

¹³⁵ “Far too busy for atrocities, says Ilse as new trial opens,” *The Washington Post*, 28 November 1950.

¹³⁶ “Ilse Koch hangs herself in cell,” *New York Times* 3 Sept. 1967.

sexual assault resulting in pregnancy while imprisoned. Only her promiscuity during and after her involvement with the Buchenwald camp was of public importance.

Several binaries become apparent once Grese and Koch are compared, as exemplified in Figure 8. The below chart compares key words and phrases used by Western newspapers to describe Grese and Koch during and after the war crimes trials of the 1940s.

	Appearance	Emotional Display	Descriptive Terminology	Personal Commentaries
Grese	Blonde, attractive, striking figure, undeniable good looks, smartly dressed, society fashion model	Hostile, scowling, defiant, contemptuous, iron calm, tears and shouts	Blonde queen, Beastress, girl sadist, girl guard, head girl, subordinate, sadistic cruelties	Single
Koch	Red-haired, vivid green eyes, plump, chubby, once attractive	N/A	(Red) witch of Buchenwald, beast, perverted, hysterical, nymphomaniacal, power-mad demon, incurable moral degenerate, barbarous, arch fiend of Nazism	Neglectful mother, adulterer, promiscuous, married

Table 1.. Comparison of terminology used to describe Koch and Grese

Despite Grese's direct involvement in administrative extermination procedures being an *Oberaufseherin*, her alleged crimes were less detailed and publicized in newspaper articles reporting on the trial. In contrast, Koch's seeming psychopathic criminality was more sensational than Grese's, as it was reported that Koch experimented with the skin of Holocaust victims to create lampshades.¹³⁷ Although both women committed crimes against humanity on behalf of the Nationalist Socialist State, it appears

¹³⁷ Far too busy for atrocities, says Ilse as new trial opens, *The Washington Post*, 28 November 1950; Ilse Koch Found Dead in Cell, *The Times*, 4 Sept. 1967.

that physical appearance and alleged atrocities influenced the degree to which female Nazi perpetrators were condemned through language and terminology in public discourse.

Lastly, another female guard on trial, Ilsa Lothar, was described in a *Toronto Daily Star* article as “depraved and beyond salvation” and as being the “prototype” in “morning police court line-ups.”¹³⁸ Lothar’s atrocities are forefront in this article, with no mention of her appearance or attire. Since the *Toronto Daily Star* had established a pattern of emphasizing the physical appearance of Grese and Volkenrath, why was Lothar’s (un)attractiveness not alluded to? Perhaps because Lothar did not meet the societal beauty standards of the time as Grese did, nor were her crimes as “treacherous” as Koch’s were portrayed to be. Lothar’s appearance and alleged crimes were perhaps not sensational enough to warrant further media representation. Also, Lothar occupied a lower status in the concentration camp system in comparison to Grese and Volkenrath and was not married to a high-ranking SS male officer as Koch was. Engaging first with post-war newspaper articles on Nazi women perpetrators helps in understanding *how* they came to be seen as ‘masculine,’ ‘promiscuous,’ and ‘deviant.’ In considering these depictions before reading the liberation photographs historians can deconstruct the ‘Deviant Nazi Woman’ through their gestures, movement, and affect in Holocaust photography.

¹³⁸ “Should Shoot us on Sight,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 18 Sept. 1945

3.2. *Aufseherinnen* in Liberator Photographs



Figure 9 "Some of the SS Girls at Belsen," Captured female guards stand behind a barbed wire fence in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Photographer Fred Thompson, April 1945, Bergen-Belsen, [Prussian Hanover; Lower Saxony], Germany. USHMM

The image in Figure 9, depicting captured female guards standing behind a barbed wire fence, allows us to examine the group cohesion amongst female perpetrators while also analysing the liberator gaze before it becomes formalized in newspaper settings and occupation policy. The above image depicts a group of young women, like those pictured in the leisure photos of the previous chapter; however, it portrays a drastically different narrative. Rather than appearing as an innocent and jovial group of girls, these four women appear defiant and nefarious. Taken from the perspective of the liberating soldiers the photograph is voyeuristic in nature. Looking at the gaze of the guards in relation to the angle of the camera we can stipulate that the *Aufseherinnen* are unaware

that they are being photographed. It is unlikely, based on the characteristics of the photograph, that it was staged; however, gender performance on the part of the guards would remain prevalent.

Each body in the image reveals the individuality of the *Aufseherinnen* further complicating the 'Deviant Woman' stereotype. Looking at the second guard from the right of the above photograph sets the tone for the viewer. She gives the impression that she is challenging the soldiers on the other side of the barbed wire fence, with her shoulders squared, hands in pockets, and slightly smirked expression. At first glance, it appears as though she is unapologetic about her complicity in the concentration camp system and National Socialism more generally. Her body language could also represent her uncertainty and distrust of the soldiers. The partially hidden *Aufseherin* to the far right reinforces the former assumption of remorselessness. Her tilt to the left with one foot tucked back behind the other like a ballet dancer exudes flirtatiousness. Her smile is hidden behind her hand suggesting that she is being coy with one of the Allied soldiers. The two *Aufseherin* to the left of the image hold a neutral, yet telling, position. There is nothing menacing or deceiving about them. Their unkempt uniform and the relaxed way they rest on the barbed wire suggests to the viewer that the camp authorities have succeeded to the allied forces.

It is worth noting that despite being taken by allied soldiers, the above photograph can illuminate variances within their individual identities. Like the women pictured in the leisure photographs, the *Aufseherinnen* in Figure 8 reveal themselves to the viewer, even if they are exaggerating or downplaying their physicality in front of the photographer.



Figure 8 *Aufseherinnen* Elizabeth Volkenrath, Anneliese Kohlmann, Charlotte Pliquet, Ilse Förster, Frieda Walter, and Magdalene Kessel unload the dead during the forced burials. With them are two unidentified male SS staff. 23 April 1945. *Life Magazine*.¹³⁹

Liberation photographs were taken by amateur U.S. Engineering Corps officers or the Signal Corp photographer who was “borrowed” from the staff of *Life* magazine.¹⁴⁰

Zelizer has argued that images became central to the liberation of the camps as a way to establish an “authoritative record of what it was seeing and help convince disbelieving publics that what was happening in the camps was real.”¹⁴¹ In their efforts to create an accurate depiction of Nazi atrocities *Life* photographers captured multiple images of the *Aufseherinnen*. The above Holocaust photograph connects the female guards and concentration camp victims in a concrete way not previously depicted. Unlike the women

¹³⁹ *Aufseherinnen* Elizabeth Volkenrath, Anneliese Kohlmann, Charlotte Pliquet, Ilse Förster, Frieda Walter, and Magdalene Kessel unload the dead during the forced burials. With them are two unidentified male SS staff. 23 April 1945. *Life Magazine*, bergenbelsen.co.uk. Ref # 851.
<http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/Staff/StaffPhotographs.asp?CampStaffID=69&PhotographsID=96&index=7>.

¹⁴⁰ Zelizer, “Gender and Atrocity,” 247.

¹⁴¹ Zelizer, “Gender and Atrocity,” 249.

relaxing at Solahütte or the guards pictured behind the barbed wired fence, these women are shown with victims of National Socialist violence. It draws a direct and visual link between the *Aufseherinnen* and their role in mass genocide. In examining the attire and physicality of each *Aufseherinnen* in Figures 9 and 10, we can draw informed conclusions about the different identities amongst the guards. The woman furthest left of the frame, Elizabeth Volkenrath, with her relaxed posture as she leans against the railing could potentially be taking a break; however, the fact that her hair remained in place and her jacket fully buttoned suggests that she did not assist with the physical labour of the burial. It is more plausible that she is instead instructing the other guards in their task especially when we consider that Volkenrath was the *Oberaufseherin*. Despite her superior position to the other female guards, by not participating in the physicality of burying Holocaust victims, Volkenrath exudes more ‘socially acceptable’ characteristics of femininity.

In contrast to Volkenrath, the other *SS-Aufseherinnen* perform differently. Charlotte Pliquet, centered in the back of the photograph, immediately catches the gaze of the viewer. Her facial expression in relation to the positioning of the woman to her right suggests they are conversing with one another; and although we are unable to know what they are discussing the above image allows historians to further extrapolate on the friendships and close bonds between women guards discussed in the previous chapter. The woman dressed in all black at the front of Figure 9 looks the most engaged of the group. Her back turned towards the other guards suggests an estrangement between her and the group. It is also plausible that she is more focused and engaged with the task at hand. Each *Aufseherin*’s physical performance is dependent on her unique experiences

and personality. Acknowledging these differences nuances our understandings of women guards as a group, allowing for divergent identities to co-exist.

3.3 Elizabeth Volkenrath and Anneliese Kohlmann

Due to a lack of sources left behind by the *SS-Aufseherinnen* it is nearly impossible to find information on how individual guards identified. This is further complicated by assumptions and judgements made throughout the post-war period. However, examining the documents historians do have access to, we can speculate on the varying types of women who worked as concentration camp guards. Looking at *Aufseherinnen* Elizabeth Volkenrath and Annaliese Kohlmann as a case study, I identify two varying types of women providing a basis for further historical examination. In complicating the narrative of women guards it should be noted that because of a lack of sources and changes in the way gender and sexual identity is viewed, historians cannot confirm if there were lesbian, trans or non-binary individuals unless directly stated or in written documents. In creating an inclusive analysis of women guards it is important to clarify terminology surrounding gender and sexual identity.

This is further complicated considering homophobia influenced perceptions of women guards, as Czech historian Anna Hájková, has underscored, “who were often described using language that for the speaker implied sexual perversion, for instance as ‘lesbian’.”¹⁴² Following the lead of Hájková, unless an individual defined themselves as

¹⁴² Anna Hájková, “Between Love and Coercion: Queer Desire, Sexual Barter and the Holocaust,” *German History* 39 no. 1 (March 2021), 3.

gay or lesbian, I will refer to them as ‘queer’ – not as a category of identity, but to allow the inclusion of all individuals employed as *SS-Aufseherinnen*.¹⁴³

3.3.1. Elizabeth Volkenrath

Oberaufseherin Elizabeth Volkenrath, the most relaxed of the group on the far left of Figure 10, reveals her superior position through her pose. Volkenrath led a relatively quiet life working in a hairdressing salon before becoming a concentration camp guard.¹⁴⁴ Born in September 1919, Volkenrath was just twenty years of age when she began working at Ravensbrück *Konzentrationslager*.¹⁴⁵ Volkenrath’s crimes were well documented in post-war newspapers covering the war crimes trials. Like Irma Grese, Volkenrath’s attractive appearance was frequently commented on throughout public discourse. Where the other *Aufseherinnen* stand with slumped shoulders, Volkenrath demonstrates her professionalism by maintaining her composure following their arrest. In combination with the discussions from post-war newspapers, it is not difficult to understand why she was depicted as ‘scowling’ and ‘contemptuous’ by allied journalists. Following this interpretation, her downward gaze suggests that she has no remorse for the victims of genocide.

¹⁴³Hájková, “Between Love and Coercion,” 3.

¹⁴⁴ Elizabeth Volkenrath, “The Trial (Defence – Evidence for the Defendant Elisabeth Volkenrath),” http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/trial/trial/trialdefencecase/trial_032_volkenrath.html.

¹⁴⁵ Volkenrath, http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/trial/trial/trialdefencecase/trial_032_volkenrath.html.



Figure 9. Charlotte Klein, Hilde Lisiewitz, Rosina Scheiber, Lisbeth Fritzner, Herta Ehlert, and Elisabeth Volkenrath shortly after their arrest. 02 May 1945. Reference no. 22. <http://bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/staff/staffphotographs.asp?campstaffid=28&photograph>

In diverging from narratives of ‘masculinity’ and ‘deviancy’ we must consider other interpretations of Volkenrath’s physicality. Information on Volkenrath’s life is limited, however, from the documents we have access to we can identify certain traits she would have possessed. Looking at the way in which she holds her body in Figures 6 and 7 we can postulate that Volkenrath took pride in herself, and her rank as an *Oberaufseherin*, seriously. Furthermore, it is possible that Volkenrath maintained her composure out of fear. Even though Volkenrath worked in the concentration camp we can speculate that she would have still possessed human emotion in various settings.

3.3.2. Anneliese Kohlmann

Anneliese Kohlmann, second from the left, is one of the only *Aufseherin* depicted in Figure 9 who could be perceived as exhibiting stereotypically ‘masculine’ traits. Dressed in all black with sleeves rolled to her elbows, Kohlmann is the only *Aufseherin* pictured not donning the typical grey skirted uniform worn by female guards. Historian Anna Hájková has conducted intensive research on Kohlmann’s life. She was born in 1921 to a single mother from a low socio-economic background and at the age of four she was adopted by an upper-middle class couple named Georg and Margarethe Kohlmann. Despite her upbringing in a higher status family, Kohlmann’s career path followed that of a working-class citizen.¹⁴⁶ Following her schooling, she was trained in applied and manual occupations. During her obligatory year in 1938 she was trained by the German Red Cross as a cook, and in 1941 she began working for a railway company where she eventually became a tram conductor.¹⁴⁷ The photograph in Figure 11 is a rather chaotic one, however, Kohlmann is easy to pick out from the group. While Kohlmann continues to remove the victims from the rail car, the other women are awkwardly navigating the masses of bodies. Her widened stance in Figures 9 and 11 demonstrate her familiarity with physical labour.

¹⁴⁶ Hájková, “Between Love and Coercion,” 10.

¹⁴⁷ Hájková, “Between Love and Coercion,” 10.



Figure 10. Magdalene Kessel, Annaliese Kohlmann, Hildegard Kambach, Charlotte Pliquet, Frieda Walter, Ilse Förster and Scharführer Friedrich Hertzog bury the dead in mass grave 2. 23 April 1945.¹⁴⁸

However, rather than generalize her physical capability as evidence of her ‘masculinity,’ Kohlmann’s identity requires further examination. Kohlmann is one of the

¹⁴⁸Magdalene Kessel, Annaliese Kohlmann, Hildegard Kambach, Charlotte Pliquet, Frieda Walter, Ilse Förster and Scharführer Friedrich Hertzog bury the dead in mass grave 2. 23 April 1945. <http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/Staff/StaffPhotographs.asp?CampStaffID=69&PhotographsID=96&index=4>, reference number 854.

few *Aufseherin* that there is record of who self-identified as a lesbian.¹⁴⁹ Hájková has commented that Kohlmann was possibly not the only queer guard in Neugraben, where she began working in 1944.¹⁵⁰ This would also be the case when considering the larger group of *Aufseherinnen*. While working at the Neugraben camp, Kohlmann fell in love with one of the camp prisoners spending nights with her in her camp barracks.¹⁵¹ Since Hájková has already provided an in-depth analysis of Kohlmann's relationship, I will not do so here; however, it is important to shed light on it within our analysis. Both Kohlmann's identity as a lesbian and romantic relationship in the camp emphasise the intersectionality of sexual identity, women, and violence allowing historians to consider all possibilities regarding diversity amongst female concentration camp guards. Examining liberation photography through a gendered lens of their workaday lives we can discern the complexities of the *Aufseherinnen* beyond notions of the 'Deviant Nazi Woman' found in newspapers and trial documents. While post-war newspapers emphasized the appearance and violence of a select few female guards, the photographs examined throughout this chapter demonstrate the differences within the larger group creating a more inclusive public narrative.

¹⁴⁹ Hájková, "Between Love and Coercion," 10.

¹⁵⁰ Hájková, "Between Love and Coercion," 10.

¹⁵¹ Hájková, "Between Love and Coercion," 12.

Chapter 4: The ‘Deviant’ *Aufseherinnen* in Popular Culture

In the mid 1970s images of the ‘Deviant Nazi Woman’ would leap from the pages of Allied newspapers to pulp fiction and film. Narratives of ‘deviant’ and ‘promiscuous’ women during the Holocaust entered the collective memory of English-speaking countries in the 1950s with the translated edition of Ka-Tzetnik’s *House of Dolls* (*Beit habubot*) as historian Annette Timm highlighted in the Introduction to *Holocaust History and the Readings of Ka-Tzetnik*.¹⁵² By the 1980s Ka-Tzetnik’s book had sold over ten-million copies internationally. Historian Pascale Bos argues that the success of *House of Dolls* can be attributed to the “unusual and controversial content of the second half of the work” which contains scenes of sexual violence against young Jewish girls at the hands of Nazi doctors, officers, soldiers, and *female* camp wardens.¹⁵³ Interestingly, Ka-Tzetnik’s depiction of female overseers is reminiscent of the articles in post-war newspapers – referring to Nazi women as the “blonde Magdalen” or “*Yaga* (Blonde Beast).”¹⁵⁴ Ka-Tzetnik’s depictions of female guards sexually deviant would make its way into cinema in the mid-1970s.

In 1975, American sexploitation film *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS* was released for public viewing. Set in Poland, the film is centered around the antagonistic blonde and blue-eyed “femme fatale,” Ilsa – the commandant of Medical Camp 9 – as she endeavours to sterilize suitable prisoners to work in brothels.¹⁵⁵ In addition to her

¹⁵² Annette Timm, “Introduction: The Dilemmas of Ka-Tzetnik’s International Fame,” in *Holocaust History and the Readings of Ka-Tzetnik* edited by Annette F. Timm, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 1-2.

¹⁵³ Pascale Bos, “Sexual Violence in Ka-Tzetnik’s *House of Dolls*,” in *Holocaust History and the Readings of Ka-Tzetnik* edited by Annette F. Timm, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018) 105.

¹⁵⁴ Bos, “Sexual Violence,” 106.

¹⁵⁵ Alicia Kozma, “Ilsa and Elsa: Nazisploitation, Mainstream Film and Cinematic Transference,” *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, edited by Daniel H. Magilow, Elizabeth Bridges, and Kristin T. Vander Lugt, (London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012) 58.

assigned task, Ilse conducts her own personal experiment to prove the physical superiority of women.¹⁵⁶ Taking on various assumptions and facts regarding the events of the Holocaust, the film *Ilse* opened with the following statement:

The film you are about to see is based upon documented fact. The atrocities shown were conducted as “medical experiments” in special concentration camps throughout Hitler’s Third Reich. Although these crimes against humanity are historically accurate, the characters depicted are composites of notorious Nazi personalities; and the events portrayed have been condensed into one locality for dramatic purposes. [...] We dedicate this film with the hope that these heinous crimes will never happen again.¹⁵⁷

In claiming during the opening credits of the film that *Ilse* is based on “documented fact,” the producers established the film as a piece of historical work for its public audiences. Thus, the film became a credible source for individuals looking to further understand Nazism and its perpetrators.

In comparison to *Ilse*’s active oversexualization of the *SS-Aufseherinnen*, Stephen Daldry’s film adaptation of *the Reader* takes a passive approach to female complicity. Based on the German novel by Bernhard Schlink, *the Reader* follows the “erotic and passionate encounters” between former concentration camp guard Hanna Schmitz and “second generation adolescent” Michael Berg.¹⁵⁸ In contrast to *Ilse: She-Wolf of the SS*, Daldry’s film makes the female perpetrator more “ambiguous [and] softens her image while [simultaneously] reinforcing her female traits.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Lynn Rapaport, “Holocaust Pornography: Profaning the Sacred in *Ilse: She Wolf of the SS*,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, 22 no. 1, (Fall 2003): 55.

¹⁵⁷ Don Edmonds, *Ilse: She Wolf of the SS* (1974), film produced by Herman Traeger, Aetas Filmproduktions, accessed on Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/288879341>.

¹⁵⁸ Audrey Brunetaux, “*Mise-en-scène*, Aesthetics, and the *Shoah*: The Ambiguous portrayal of a Female Perpetrator in *The Reader*,” *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, Vol. 17 (1), Spring 2011, 102.

¹⁵⁹ Brunetaux, “*Mise-en-Scène*,” 105.

Ilsa and *the Reader* are not the first instances in which female SS guards are depicted in ‘deviant’ terminology. In fact, notions of female deviancy have a long history - notably the classical Greek myths of the female Amazonian warriors. The Amazons have been historically portrayed as “sexually hedonistic,” as possessing the “physical and sexual traits of men.”¹⁶⁰ In their essence, Amazonian women were “bad” at *being* women as envisioned by the male gaze. This masculine representation has been assigned to violent or disobedient women for centuries. These women were not conceived of as “disruptive” members of society but rather inadequate women in themselves.¹⁶¹ Drawing on this long characterization of gendered nonconformity, the German *Aufseherinnen* – as an umbrella term – came to represent “deviant women” during the Holocaust. Because of their preconceived gendered and reproductive expectations, Nazi women have been denied, as Kimberly Allar argues, the “assertion that they [were] ordinary persons who exercised agency and rationally participated in genocide.”¹⁶² The assumption that female SS guards were inherently ‘deviant’ has continued within the public memory of Nazi perpetrators.

This continuation is evidenced by the publication in 2018, of Jerry Larson and Erik Clark’s self-published book through Amazon, entitled *Irma Grese: Hitler’s WW2 Female Monsters Exposed*. Through selective research conducted on a handful of websites, the book intended to take the reader on a “shocking and disturbing path through

¹⁶⁰ Caron E. Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Thinking About Women’s Violence in Global Politics*, (London: Zed Books, 2015), 112.

¹⁶¹ Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers*, 3.

¹⁶² Kimberly Allar, “Setting the Picture Straight: The Ordinary Women of Nazi Germany and Rwanda who Participated in Genocide,” in *Aftermath: Genocide, Memory, and History* edited by Karen Auerbach (Clayton, Victoria, Australia: Monash University Publishing, 2015), 23.

the tales of evil and the role that women played during Hitler's reign."¹⁶³ In one hundred and twenty-five pages, Larson and Clark claim to provide a "complete picture of the atrocities committed by the Nazis, the psychological and physical damage done to the inmates of Nazi concentration camps," and even "the science behind such evil and the after-effects of the Holocaust."¹⁶⁴ However, rather than provide a more comprehensive analysis of the Holocaust and Nazi women perpetrators, the book perpetuates outdated assumptions and characterizations regarding the *SS-Aufseherinnen*, including claims of supposed masculinity, promiscuity, and deviancy. Although recent studies within the historical discipline have begun to move past this narrative, as demonstrated in the introduction to this thesis, Larson and Clark illuminate its continued presence within public memory.

Historians have already conducted significant examinations of post-war portrayals of *SS-Aufseherinnen* in film, literature, and historical scholarship. Antony Rowland's essay, "Reading the Female Perpetrator," provides a useful examination of the responses to the "spectacle of female perpetrators such as Irma Grese and Ilse Koch."¹⁶⁵ In his essay, Rowland argued that the spectrality of female perpetrators holds a "peculiar cultural obsession for post-war European artists and filmmakers [...] that far outweighs such perpetrators instrumentality."¹⁶⁶ After conducting my own research on the perceived deviancy of Nazi women I would have to agree with Rowland's conclusion. The way in which they have been remembered has exaggerated the level of influence women guards

¹⁶³ Jerry Larson and Erik Clark, *Irma Grese: Hitler's WW2 Female Monsters Exposed*, (Bolton, ON: Manufactured by Amazon, 2018), back cover.

¹⁶⁴ Larson and Clark, *Irma Grese*, 125.

¹⁶⁵ Antony Rowland, "Reading the Female Perpetrator," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 17 no.1-2 (Autumn/Winter 2011), 145.

¹⁶⁶ Rowland, "Reading the Female Perpetrator," 157.

had within the concentration camps. The *SS-Aufseherinnen* were instrumental in the function and maintenance of the women's concentration camps and sub-camps, however, they could only progress so far within the camp hierarchy thus limiting their authority.

The following chapter traces the evolution of the 'Deviant Nazi Woman' within popular culture through the fictional characters of Ilsa and Hanna. The aim of this chapter is to outline the two most prominent examples of the 'Deviant Woman' narrative within popular culture after 1950. While the second and third chapters outlined new areas of consideration within the everyday lives of the *Aufseherinnen* and traced post-war discussions in public mediums seeking to deconstruct notions of deviancy; this chapter analyzes how the 'Deviant Nazi Woman' was sensationalized within public memory.

2.1 Ilsa in *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS*

In the opening scene of *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS*, Ilsa uses her position as a guard to gain sexual access to a male concentration camp prisoner in an active attempt to achieve orgasm. The audience discovers that Ilsa's climax is unfulfilling due to the limited stamina of her victim. The opening scene is immediately followed by an eroticized depiction of Ilsa in the shower. The camera pans slowly down her body, following the shower head, as she runs the water across her bosom. The viewer is led to believe that Ilsa brings herself to orgasm with the shower head. As a punishment for his failed attempt to please the commandant, Ilsa commands other female guards to castrate him.¹⁶⁷ The film's depiction of a sexually hedonistic female commandant brings to focus the public discussions read in post-war newspapers about Nazi women perpetrators. *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS*, visualized the 'Deviant Nazi Woman' from public conceptions of her

¹⁶⁷ *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*, directed by Don Edmonds (1974: Aetas Filmproduktions; Vimeo, 2018), website <https://vimeo.com/288879341>.

by combining ‘traits’ from both Irma Grese and Ilsa Koch. Dianne Thorne’s ‘Ilsa’ embodies the attributes assigned to Irma Grese throughout her trial: ‘blonde’, ‘attractive’, ‘striking figure’, ‘undeniable good looks’. Furthermore, her behaviour throughout the film takes on traits that were previously assigned to Ilsa Koch: ‘perverted’, ‘nymphomaniacal’, ‘power-mad demon’ is embodied within the character of Ilsa.

In examining this representation, Stacy Banwell and Michael Fiddler argue that the “feminine-as-monstrous” trope is a “warning of what happens when women explode from the enclosed realm of the private sphere into the public world.”¹⁶⁸ Through the visual depiction of Ilsa as a uniformed Nazi guard, Banwell and Fiddler commented that the objectification of women through the lens of monsterization has achieved a masculinized hyperreality.¹⁶⁹ Thus, ‘Ilsa’ becomes a warning to the public of what happens when women push the boundaries beyond the private world of the household.

Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS depicted female SS guards as having more autonomy and power within the concentration camps than they were afforded under the Nazi regime. In actuality, the highest position a woman could reach within the camps was *Oberaufseherin*, several ranks below that of a camp commandant. As a result of the film’s opening statement claiming that it was a historically accurate depiction of the Nazi concentration camps, *Ilsa*, overemphasized and sensationalized Hitler’s *Aufseherinnen*.

2.2 Hanna in *The Reader*

Hanna Schmitz in *the Reader* depicted female guards in a less sensationalized light; however, her characterization maintained the idea of sexual deviancy and power. In

¹⁶⁸ Banwell, “Gendered Viewing Strategies,” 156.

¹⁶⁹ Banwell, “Gendered Viewing Strategies,” 157.

contrast to Ilsa, Hanna as a perpetrator remains ambiguous throughout the first half of the film. The first time the audience is introduced to Hanna, she is darkened by the dim light in the vestibule to her apartment, as though shrouded in mystery. Her first interaction with the young Michael Berg is witnessed in this scene. Becoming ill on the bus home Michael runs into the vestibule to gather himself. Upon seeing him Hanna, in a matter-of-fact manner, helps Michael clean himself up by bathing him. While simultaneously being depicted as the opposite of a motherly woman, Hanna is dressed in a men's dress shirt, further separating her from stereotypically feminine comportment.

After Michael recovers from his illness, he visits Hanna in her apartment where a love affair ensues between them, Hanna taking charge in much of their sexual encounters. The notable age difference between Michael and Hanna is emphasized throughout the film in a way that underscores the "inappropriate" relationship between the two lovers. In her examination of *The Reader*, Sabine Aretz asserts that the sexualized depictions of female concentration guards were used to depict their "complexity and culpability" as perpetrators, which in turn functioned as a tool to dismiss their humanity or to "relativize their liability."¹⁷⁰ By opening the film with Hanna and Michael's love affair, Daldry reinforces the relationship between sexual deviancy and perversion and the female SS guard. As Aretz has noted, visualizations of the Holocaust "make use of female bodies and their nudity in order to find justifications" for perpetrators behaviour.¹⁷¹ This tendency is witnessed in both *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS* and *the Reader*.

¹⁷⁰ Sabine Elisabeth Aretz, "Sexualization of Female Perpetration in Fictional Holocaust Films: A Case Study of *The Reader* (2008)," *Genealogy* 52 no. 3 (2019), 2.

¹⁷¹ Aretz, "Sexualization of Female Perpetration," 5.

Ka-Tzetnik's *House of Dolls* introduced images of "sexually frustrated," "sadistic," and "perverse" into the world of pulp fiction and film. Ilsa, as well as the overseers in Ka-Tzetnik's novel, are very clearly the villain in their stories; whereas Hanna shifts from being depicted as sexually deviant to being passively feminine which removes her from being seen as a villain herself.¹⁷² *The Reader* perpetuates the narrative of female deviancy, however, the film demonstrates a shift in popular depictions of *Aufseherinnen*. Hanna is humanized in Daldry's depiction of her, making her more relatable to the viewer. Portraying Nazi women perpetrators in humanistic terms creates a deeper understanding of perpetration more generally. What Ka-Tzetnik's novel, *She-Wolf of the SS*, and Daldry's film highlight is an attempt within the public narrative to accept women in violent settings and to do so required them to be seen as 'other' from those women who remained 'pure.'

¹⁷² Aretz, "Sexualization of Female Perpetrators," 7.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Images of perpetrator women raise the conundrum of how to think about gender performance across media. If as Evans and Mailänder have argued, drawing on Elizabeth Edwards work that “photography is an interface between history-as-lived and history-as-recorded,” this thesis has taken up the question of public perceptions towards female SS guards compared to their actual lived experiences within the camps.¹⁷³ Karl Hoecker’s album, filled with photographs taken during the Second World War, is marked by its correlation with the Nazi concentration camps. Examined alongside liberation photography from *Life Magazine*, the images highlight varying sides of the same coin. In looking at the images in a chronological way, what this thesis argues is that private photography intended for personal viewing and professional photographs documenting National Socialist atrocities emphasize the tension between the lived experience of *SS-Aufseherinnen* and the perceived experience within collective memory, calling into question continued notions of the ‘Deviant Nazi Woman’. I further argue that Holocaust photography allows historians access to the lives of Nazi perpetrators not accessible through written documentation.

In asking *what* personal photos tell us about the individuals pictured we have been able to consider how female friendships manifested themselves within the concentration camps, specifically amongst the *Aufseherinnen*. While photographs leave much to be considered regarding these relationships, they allow historians to visualize *how* these friendships might have looked both in the positive experiences of their personal lives as well as their existence within the camp walls. In addition, unlike the post-war discussions

¹⁷³Mailänder and Evans, “Cross-dressing,” 2.

in Western newspapers, we can examine the role of family and motherhood for women guards in ordinary terms. We can visualize the *Aufseherinnen* as comforting and loving mothers which subsequently (re)humanizes them.

Public discourse surrounding *Aufseherinnen* Irma Grese and SS-wife Ilsa Koch cemented a relationship between Nazi women perpetrators and violence that cast women as masculine and promiscuous. Influenced by societal standards of gender, Western newspapers latched on to this portrait of Grese and Koch to come to terms with the participation of women in National Socialist genocide, seeing their behaviour and identity as outside the norms of traditional womanhood. The language employed by journalists to describe Grese and Koch during their post-war trials was dependent on the outwardly appearance of the women. Grese was blonde, attractive, had a striking figure but was also seductive and excessive in her desires. In contrast, Ilsa Koch was red-haired, plump, and ‘was once attractive’. Both women were simultaneously stripped of normative womanhood, however, in varying ways. Grese was infantilized by being called a ‘girl sadist’ or ‘head girl’ whereas Koch was likened to unhuman creatures such as a ‘Red Witch,’ beast, and power-mad demon.

While notions of sadism and deviancy persist within public memory as evidenced in the film *the Reader* (2008) and the book *Irma Grese: Hitler’s WW2 Female Monsters Exposed* (2018), reading Holocaust photography expansively for gesture, movement, affect, and comradeship enables scholars to further expand on the workaday lives of female concentration camp guards, providing a more nuanced glimpse into the multiple ways in which women lived their lives in support of the regime’s murderous goals.

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