Unit 2: Women and the Holocaust

"along the stations toward extinction. . . each gender lived its own journey."

—Mary Felstiner

This unit covers the following objectives:

* Understand the historical background behind Hitler's rise to power and the development of the concentration camp system.

* Examine different positions in the debate as to whether gender is an appropriate category of analysis when discussing a tragedy as enormous as the Holocaust.

* Understand the position in society of both Jewish and non-Jewish German women before the Holocaust, and how this position determined the roles women played and the choices they made during the period of Jewish persecution.

Parts 1 and 2: Women in Nazi Germany

This section contains an audio lecture online.

In this part of Unit 2, we will examine more in-depth the experience of women (Aryan and Jewish) during the Nazi era. Kaplan chronicles the intense ‘multi-tasking’ that Jewish women were forced to perform as the Nazi persecution of the Jews escalated during the mid-1930s, as Jewish husbands and fathers lost their jobs and were often forced to flee Germany. Koonz examines how the Nazis limited women's sphere of influence to Kinder, Kirche, Kuche (Children, Church and the Kitchen) and sought to reduce the importance of the family in order to build young people's allegiance to the state. Bock's article attempts to revise this traditional view that Nazism restricted women's participation to the sphere of family and dutiful motherhood. She argues that ambition and access to employment and public leadership roles were decisive factors driving women's participation in the Nazi regime. These articles help to shed light on some of the many complex factors influencing the difficult choices all women affected by the Nazi terror were forced to make.

In week three we will cover Parts 1 and 2.

- Examine the Holocaust timeline at www.pbs.org/auschwitz.

- Read: “Introduction: The Role of Gender in the Holocaust” in Women in the Holocaust (pp. 1-18), and “Prologue: Women and the Holocaust” (pp. 1-19) and Chronology (pp. 22-32) in Different Voices (on e-reserve).
* Take the quiz in Blackboard on the background material.

- Next, listen to the articles that I have summarized in an audio lecture, and then take the "Why Gender?" survey.

- Read Marion Kaplan, “Keeping Calm and Weathering the Storm: Jewish Women’s Responses to Daily Life in Nazi Germany, 1933-39” in Women in the Holocaust, pp. 39-54.


Discussion

1. How does private space become politicized in the period that Bock describes here? How does this affect the likelihood that women will go along with the Nazis?

2. According to Bock, were mothers and wives victims or the support force that allowed the regime to function more effectively? And what do you, personally, think?

3. What different arguments do Koonz and Bock make about women relationship to the public and private spheres in Nazi Germany? What is the main argument of each article?

Part 3: Judith Isaacson's Seed of Sarah

This section contains two video clips online.

From Walter Renn "The Holocaust in the School Textbooks of the Federal Republic of Germany"

In 1919, the German people had been told that they bore collective responsibility for the outbreak of WWI. They rejected this accusation, especially because this war guilt was used to force them to pay reparations. In 1945, the Germans were again afraid that retribution would be based on the accusation of collective responsibility. Defenders of the German nation argued vehemently that it was unfair to punish the entire population for the decisions of its government which were carried out in secret. For this reason, it was a long time before Germans were willing to discuss what part they bore of Germany’s guilt and responsibility for what was done to the Jews.

In German history textbooks from the 60s and 70s, the authors almost never declare that Germans carried out the Holocaust, but instead state that Hitler and/or the SS carried it out. When they write about the SS and other officers, they speak in abstractions, leaving the perpetrators anonymous, referring just to 'the extermination machine' or the 'cold-blooded desk-murderers.' These perpetrators are never discussed or considered as part of the German people.
Also, the passive voice is used a lot: "Life was made unbearable for the Jews." "Jews lost their lives in factory-like killings." When they discuss other parts of the war (fighting on the Eastern front, for example), they mention German divisions and the German occupation, but when discussing the Holocaust directly, Germans are almost never mentioned. They only say that "Jews were removed from German-occupied areas." They do not deny the German origins and execution of the Holocaust—but they definitely try to distance Germans from the events. They totally leave out the fact that regular Germans took part in identifying, denouncing, registering or guarding Jews, in loading or transporting them, in employing them as slave labor. And, of course, all of the roundups and transports took place in broad daylight, travelers at train stations could see Jews being shipped to Auschwitz every day.

Studies show that, especially in the decades after the war, there was a lot of emphasis in textbooks on the German resistance to Hitler's regime, but it was mostly in a pessimistic vein, emphasizing how dangerous it was for Germans to oppose Hitler. There is not much emphasis on the efforts of other countries to save their Jews, maybe because they made the Germans look bad. The Danes, for example, saved almost all Danish Jews by sending them to neutral Sweden. Finland was allied with Germany but still refused to give up their Jews. In Holland they tried to carry out a general strike in support of the Jews. Although parts of France did cooperate with the Nazis for a time, generally many French, Italian and Greek authorities and citizens resisted German attempts to deport Jews from their territories.

In 1979, a program about the Holocaust made by the American network NBC was broadcast in Germany. The TV studio received more than 30,000 calls from viewers who wanted more information. Some wanted to give evidence that corroborated what had been shown, others called to turn in their spouses! A majority of viewers were shocked by the program and a huge debate was started over how much the average German had known during the war.

Generally most textbooks claim that the German people knew very little about what was happening to the Jews in concentration camps in Poland (Auschwitz, Treblinka) or in Czechoslovakia (Terezin). Even the camps in Germany were kept away from main roads and surrounded by fences. Most claim that even if Germans did hear of what was happening (say, from soldiers on leave), they either didn't believe something so horrible could really be happening or they kept quiet out of fear.

Some textbooks do challenge this view. One book cited a study by a man who interviewed 300 relatives and acquaintances about what they knew about the concentration camps while they were in use. He concludes that people knew as much or as little as they wanted to know—they knew enough to know that they didn't want to know anymore (At what point do you know enough to make you responsible or complicit?). The bottom line was people were indifferent to the fate of the Jews with the start of the war they had their own problems to worry about.

Other educators have argued, though, that even if the people didn't know about the concentration camps, they still knew about the deportations, the unjust and brutal expulsion of Jews from their communities. It's kind of pointless to argue about who knew what about the camps until you can get people to at least acknowledge their role and responsibility in the deportation.
Discussion

Directions: Respond to the following discussion questions in the Group Discussion area of Blackboard.

1. As the situation in Hungary becomes tense, where, in what acts, are women resisting? On the other hand, in what instances are they internalizing the abuse? Do women in this reading have any unique fears or experiences? Do the men? What fears or experiences do men and women share?

2. Judith is heckled for being Jewish while she recites a poem at a Hungarian celebration. She digs in and continues on. Later, her mentor Dr. Biszo brushes her concerns aside, assuring her that there are very few Nazis in their town and that it is 'better to suffer an injustice than to commit one.' As she leaves his office she notices a tree bow humbly to the ground and rise up again. What tone is she setting here, describing Biszo's advice and her (and the tree's) performance? What do you think: is it always nobler to be the passive victim?

3. What kinds of emotions does she experience as she returns to Hungary in 1977? (133-5) What would you say have been some of the long-term effects of the trauma she suffered? In what ways, during her visits, does she attempt to reclaim her earlier identity?

4. How is this memoir different from Journey into the Whirlwind? What different choices did she make in writing this work (about what to write about or how to describe it or how much of her personal feelings to put into it) that make it more or less effective in various ways?