

HITLER'S FURIES

GERMAN WOMEN
IN THE
NAZI KILLING FIELDS

Wendy Lower

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT
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pate directly in the violence, or, as some extremists would see it, the "opportunity" to collaborate. They were German female patriots doing their civil service. They were curious; they sought adventure. Once they entered the eastern territories and witnessed the atrocities, such as the ghetto liquidations in Rivne, they articulated emotions of concern and shock.

A secretary in Slonim was awakened at four in the morning by the sound of shooting. For hours she watched from her window as thousands of Jews from Slonim were herded out of the ghetto under constant gunfire and lined up. The ghetto was in flames. The next day, when she was allowed to leave her quarters — the SS and police had declared a lockdown during the action — she saw on the streets at the edge of the ghetto two long rows of charred Jewish bodies. Like Schücking and Struwe, she could hardly avoid witnessing the mass murder. She did not condone it, but she could not stop it either.

4



Accomplices

WOMEN LIKE ANNETTE SCHÜCKING, Ilse Struwe, Ingelene Ivens, and Erika Ohr were not exceptional women during the war. They were exceptional *after* the war. Of the hundreds of thousands who did go east, few published or publicly spoke at length about the Jewish victims and atrocities they had seen, as these four women did. During the Nazi era, many women were happy to don a uniform and embrace their newfound adulthood and civic identity in the movement. Then, in 1945, they removed and hid their insignias, and tucked their uniforms into drawers and attic chests. They concealed the provenance of items that they had plundered from the East, including the personal belongings of Jewish victims.

The general silence of German women after the war is rooted in many things, including feelings of shame, grief, and fear. It was certainly in the interest of many women who were in the eastern killing fields to hide the fact that they were near crime scenes. Even if they wanted to speak, there were few who wanted to listen. There is no social tradition that encourages women to tell war stories about

the violence they saw, experienced, or perpetrated. In contrast, German women could speak about their hardships and victimization on the home front — about doing men's work, such as operating streetcars, policing marketplaces, and managing farms; about the devastating aerial bombings of their towns; about homelessness, flight, and postwar famine. Audiences were quite receptive to recollections that affirmed traditional wartime roles for women as staunch defenders, maids-in-waiting, and innocent martyrs.

Their youth explains how so many of these women got swept up in the moment and the movement. Or was this a later excuse? In memoirs and interviews, and even as defendants in the courtroom, German women explained shameful actions with the comment "Oh, I was so young in those days." As young women they were naive, and they were malleable. But during the war, as each came closer to the horrible reality of the nation's deeds, each had to make a personal choice. And while there might not be the option to leave one's post, nor could one avoid being a witness to genocide, there were choices concerning how one behaved during and after the war.

Many German women encountered what happened, in its various stages. They peered into ghettos out of curiosity, discovered mass graves, and, like Annette Schücking, were invited to sort through Jewish clothing and personal belongings. Like Ingelene Ivens, they encountered Jewish refugees seeking aid on the school playground; like Ilse Struwe, they saw from windows that Jews were being led away to the edge of town, and they heard the mass shootings. To protect themselves, most who saw something chose to shut their eyes afterward. But what about the women who were at the center of the mass-murder machinery and could not turn a blind eye?

In Holocaust studies, one type of perpetrator, fashioned after Adolf Eichmann and others who organized deportations of Jews from Berlin headquarters, is the male bureaucratic killer, or desk murderer. He commits genocide through giving or passing along written orders; thus his pen or typewriter keys become his weapon. This type of modern genocidaire assumes that the paper, like its administra-

tor, remains clean and bloodless. The desk murderer does his official duty. He convinces himself as he orders the deaths of tens of thousands that he has remained decent, civilized, and even innocent of the crime. What about the women who staffed those offices, the female assistants whose agile fingers pressed the keys on the typewriters, and whose clean hands distributed the orders to kill?

As Hitler's empire expanded and contracted, women had to take on more tasks, not only in managing households and farms but also in running government systems and private businesses. In fact, the proportion of women in the Gestapo offices of Vienna and Berlin was unusually high, reaching forty percent by the war's end. Women were expected to stand by men as well as fill their positions to free them up for the front. The exigencies of war accelerated the labor trends of the interwar period and also reversed the educational policies of the 1930s: women's access to higher education improved for a time, women swelled the ranks of government offices, and a new female hierarchy emerged, from regular aides to senior staff. But such social mobility came with a price — participation in operations of mass murder.

Women secretaries, file clerks, typists, and telephone operators were attached to the bureaucratic tentacles of the Reich system of rule. Each office or outpost employed at least one German woman from the Reich. If on average there was one female assistant reporting to five male administrators, this would put the figure of female staff in the civilian governing offices of Nazi-occupied Poland at about five thousand, with at least twice as many in Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltics combined. As administrative accomplices in central offices where the Holocaust was organized and implemented — such as the district governor's office or the Department of Jewish Affairs of the security police — most claimed that they were "just doing their job." But their routine procedures generated unprecedented crimes. None could claim ignorance of the human impact of her work.

Little has been written about the internal workings of these offices, in part because of inattention to the revealing testimony of secretaries who were on the inside or to that of the Jewish survivors who interacted with these women and identified them as having been at crime

scenes. Within the local hierarchy of German female administrators, the secretary to the district commissar (regional governor) was the person most often seen by his side. The commissars were not numerous (especially if one considers the vast size of the area they governed), but they were notoriously visible, mockingly described as pheasants for the uniforms they wore as they strutted about — a garish mustard-brown, decorated with colorful Nazi patches and pins. Their female assistants earned the label of smaller fowl, *Goldammern* or “yellowhammers” — sparrow-sized, thick-billed birds that nest in patches of scrub or ditches. In small-town settings such as the Polish-Lithuanian town of Lida, German officials spent a good deal of time together: they and their families shared housing, schools, canteens, and offices, and they swam and picnicked together at local lakes and streams.

Among the elite in Lida was Liselotte Meier, the young woman who chose office work in the East over factory work in Leipzig. Her month-long orientation at Crössinsee Castle in Pomerania, Poland, included training in shooting a pistol. One of the dignitaries at the orientation caught her eye, a handsome Stormtrooper named Hermann Hanweg. Almost twice her age, Hanweg had worked his way up in the Party administration and, like many “old fighters,” was rewarded with a sinecure in the empire. The two spent time together in Minsk and fell in love. Hanweg insisted that Liselotte join him when he was given the post of district commissar of Lida. When they arrived there in the early fall of 1941, a mobile killing squad had already swept through town and massacred the Jewish intelligentsia and patients in local hospitals. Thousands of Jews remained, however, and it was Hanweg's duty to make the region *Judenfrei*, free of Jews.

The twenty-year-old Meier learned to stay close to Hanweg and to mix business with pleasure. She followed him everywhere. With her desk positioned in front of his office door, she controlled all access to her boss. She knew the Jewish council members; some twenty years after the war, she could still identify them by name. She was also close to Hanweg's family, though perhaps not by choice. Hanweg ordered Meier to escort his wife and three children when they relocated to

Lida. The children called Meier “Vice-Mama”; the wife of the commissar named her “Brutus.”

In Lida, the Hanweg children attended a special German school and played in the local parks and forests. They routinely accompanied their mother and father on tours of the ghetto workshops, where thousands of Jews tried desperately to stay alive by fulfilling every order and whim of the local Germans. To please the commissar, a team of Jewish craftsmen created an elaborate electric train set for his son's birthday. They also presented Hanweg with a set of rings, one for each member of the family. Today the commissar's ring remains a treasured family heirloom. Featuring a large amber stone set in silver, it is decorated with the Hanweg coat of arms — a tiny ax and mace finely carved by an artisan with a keen eye for the minute detail of filigree.

Mounting wartime deprivations in the Old Reich — food and housing shortages — made the riches of the East irresistible. Secretaries may have received letters and special personal items from back home, but by far the bulk of care packages in the postal system were sent not from Germany to the East but rather the other way around. Personnel in the occupied territories shipped trainloads of plundered items to family in Germany and Austria — crates of eggs, flour, sugar, clothing, and home furnishings. It was the biggest campaign of organized robbery and economic exploitation in history, and German women were among its prime agents and beneficiaries.

This indulgence was not condoned by the regime; Jewish belongings were officially Reich property and not meant for personal consumption. Some plunderers, women among them, were punished and even executed for stealing from the Reich. But it is clear that in this particular activity there was little regard for obeying the Führer, especially because the massive theft was part and parcel of the economy of the Third Reich. If one had to do the dirty work of mass murder, one expected to be compensated. The greed of German men and women who gained access to the plunder was seemingly insatiable. The wife of a policeman in Warsaw, for instance, stockpiled so much that she lacked the space to hide it; she simply piled up the booty outside, around her house. The enterprising wife of a police official in Lviv

who decided to sell her plunder brazenly established a shop on the very street where her husband worked at police headquarters. Wives of top officials paraded around in stolen furs and demanded superior living quarters, ordering Jewish craftsmen to lay stolen porcelain tiles in lavish bathrooms and to erect custom balconies. The excesses were so blatant, in fact, that they generated a number of critical reports and investigations during the war.

The distribution and consumption of Jewish goods near the mass-murder sites was experienced as a triumph and cause for celebration. Operation (*Aktion*) Reinhard, the Nazi campaign to murder 1.7 to 2 million Polish Jews (along with Jews of other nationalities) who were sent to the gassing centers of Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka, produced one of the biggest plunder depots in all of Nazi-occupied Europe. Sitting on this pile of booty near Lublin was the manager of this murder operation, SS Major General Odilo Globocnik, and surrounding him were his "ladies." According to a former aide, Globocnik's secretaries "cheerfully" prepared lists of Jewish deportees to Treblinka, lists of Jews who died, and lists of confiscated property.

Globocnik's lovers and secretaries were not direct perpetrators of the Holocaust, or at least no testimony or documentation has surfaced proving that they committed violent acts. But they were accomplices: they took dictation and typed up the orders facilitating the robbery, deportation, and mass murder of Jews. They performed these duties with the knowledge that they were contributing to the goal of total extermination of the Jewish people. They transmitted Globocnik's reports to Himmler on the "successful" operations of the Final Solution. As the creators of professional and private havens for the top managers, such as Globocnik, they contributed to the normalization of the perverse.

One day when Hanweg's son went to the ghetto workshops, where he liked to play, he discovered that no Jews were there. Since Jews in Lida were regularly shot in town and in the neighboring villages, he was not surprised when he overheard adults saying that nearly all the Jews had been killed. The first and largest massacre had occurred on May 8,

1942, two kilometers from town. About 5,670 Jews were driven to the outskirts, forced to undress and kneel before mass graves, and shot. A Jewish work detail spread quicklime and earth over the bodies. Then Hanweg and his deputy forced the workers, who had just buried their loved ones, to bow down and say thank you for allowing them to live. In town, the corpses of the elderly and children littered the streets. These victims had been too frail or small to walk to their deaths on their own.

All the secretaries in the offices saw the commotion and heard the gunfire. But Liselotte Meier was more than a passive witness: she participated in the planning of the massacres and was present at more than one of the shootings that occurred in 1942-43. In fact, postwar statements about crimes committed by the commissar's office in Lida stressed that Meier was the most knowledgeable person, "better informed than many of the officials in the station."

A certified bookkeeper, Meier went with Hanweg to the Jewish workshops three or four times each week and kept careful tallies of German orders for goods and deliveries from the Jewish laborers. She discussed the orders with members of the Jewish council and the elder of the council, an engineer named Altmann. She placed orders of her own as well. A former Jewish laborer recalled:

Commissariat officials, German officers, and their relatives took advantage of the workshops and flooded them with orders that were completed on time. A special department handled leather leftovers received from boot factories, and made leather items such as belts, wallets, purses, stripe-colored boxes, and leather jewelry that especially charmed female officials at the commissariat offices.

Jewish laborers catered to Meier's and Hanweg's every wish, constructing a swimming pool for their enjoyment, renovating a villa, and serving them postcoital delicacies as they lay naked in bed. In hindsight, it may seem incomprehensible that intimate relationships developed within the maelstrom of genocidal violence. But the violent hor-

rors of the Holocaust were no mere backdrop to Meier and Hanweg's love affair; they were a central drama igniting its passion. The two were intoxicated with their newfound power and "place in the sun," a sensation known in German as the *Ostrausch* or "eastern rush." It was a euphoria that was expressed in sex and violence.

Hanweg's secretary-concubine became his confidante. He gave Meier special access to the office safe where the most secret orders were stored. She did not take simple dictation from the commissar, which was mainly the job of the stenographer, but was often told to write up orders and take care of clerical matters with other local German officials, including the gendarme leaders. When questioned after the war, Liselotte Meier could not recall if she had issued an order that authorized the shooting of sixteen Jews who appeared late for work, an order that others later accused her of writing. During secret planning meetings before a mass shooting, Meier took the meeting notes and coordinated the logistics with executioners from the security police (SD), the local gendarmerie, the indigenous mayor, and the deputy commissar in charge of "Jewish affairs." She was careful about how much she committed to paper. "There was little written traffic about Jewish actions, that was absolutely secret," she later stated. Her boss simply told the local police chief and office staff when and where the pits were to be dug.

Meier kept the coveted office stamp in her desk drawer; that meant that she could sign on behalf of the commissar. The official stamp and special forms, such as the worker's identification card (the so-called Gold Card), were potentially lifesaving bureaucratic tools. For a Jewish person, the only way to escape the shooting pits, other than flight and suicide, was to secure a labor assignment. The commissar and his staff had the authority to certify who was and who was not a Jew. They could decide who would be killed, who could be spared. Secretaries who participated in the selection of Jewish laborers and issued the identification cards had their favorites; one of Meier's was the Jewish hairstylist who came to her private quarters. While this stylist was a useful Jew, most others were, as she put it, "that *Dreck*" — garbage. In Slonim (in what is Belarus today), another special assistant to the dis-



Jews forced to march through Lida before being killed, with German guards — a female official or civilian among them — presumably selecting laborers and appropriating Jewish belongings, March 1942

trict commissar, the secretary Erna Reichmann, stood before a column of two thousand Jews who were being marched to the mass shooting site. Jewish laborers were pulled out of the line based on a formal list that she and her colleagues had typed up, or they were selected spontaneously. Reichmann spotted a Jewish woman who "had not finished knitting a sweater for her," so she removed her from the column.

Yet even these skilled Jewish laborers were, to the Nazi way of thinking, ultimately dispensable. Deprived of any worth or dignity as human beings, Jews became the slaves and playthings of their German overseers. Killing Jews became a source of amusement in Lida, like hunting rabbits. As one Jewish survivor recalled:

On one Sunday all the Jews of Lida were called out to go into the nearby forest to clear out the rabbits hiding in the bushes, and chase them in the direction of the hunters. A group of several hundred men were recruited for this job, and a long line of Jews marched down the road to the forest in the deep snow, shak-

ing from cold and fear of what they would encounter. Suddenly a group of winter carriages appeared, including the local commissar Hanweg and his staff, senior officials, and women wearing beautiful fur coats. They were all drunk, lying around their seats in the carriage hugging and shouting, their peals of laughter echoing in the distance. The carriages galloped between the rows of marchers, and the shouting grew louder. The wild Germans mocked the Jews, laughed at them, and struck those nearby with whips. One of the drunken officers aimed his hunting rifle and started shooting at the Jews to the raucous pleasure of his staff. The bullets struck some marchers who collapsed in pools of blood.



A "Frau Apfelbaum" with a shotgun in the Lida woods

After the war Meier admitted that she joined her colleagues on these Sunday outings and hunting trips. Jews had become easy targets that brought instant gratification to inexperienced, often intoxicated marksmen. Exhausted and malnourished, Jewish laborers moved slowly in the snow. Their dark figures stood out against the white winter landscape. A lucky few dodged the German bullets and found refuge in the camouflage of the forest. "Trees saved us," a survivor from Lida would later say. "We had so much confidence in bushes, they could not see us there." Meier could not have imagined that, twenty years later, Lida's Jews would reappear to identify and accuse her.

Historians of the Holocaust have often focused on the first wave of massacres in the Soviet Union, perpetrated by the mobile security units known as the *Einsatzgruppen*. By the end of 1941 these elite killing squads had gunned down close to five hundred thousand Soviet Jews. So extensive was the documentation of their gruesome work that after the war American prosecutors conducted a special Nuremberg trial against leading *Einsatzgruppen* members. But little has been said about those who typed up this damning evidence of the Holocaust. There were at least thirteen female typists assigned to *Einsatzgruppe A*. One of them listened carefully to her boss, Walther Stahlecker, as he dictated numbers adding up to 135,567 Jews, communists, and mentally ill who had been shot in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Belarus in the late summer and autumn of 1941. She helped type, copy, and officially certify the 143-page report to be sent to Berlin from the *Einsatzgruppe A* outpost in Riga. A special map accompanying Stahlecker's final report to Heydrich in January 1942 depicted the near completion of the Final Solution in the Ostland. A coffin was drawn for each region, and a tally of the total number of Jews killed appeared beside each coffin on the map.

Recipients of the Stahlecker reports did not have to bother to read every statement. The tallies were impressive enough, and the visual aid of the coffins communicated clearly the scope of the killing. Women in SS field offices prepared thousands of pages of such reports, received them in Berlin headquarters, and then distributed them across Reich agencies.



A coffin-decorated tally by Einsatzgruppe A of Jews killed in each region in 1941

Himmler realized that women constituted a critical labor force for carrying out his genocidal plans. Besides association with the SS as camp guards and fertile brides, women were permitted to join the elite terror organization in a special auxiliary corps of administrators. In early 1942 Himmler ordered the establishment of a female reporting and clerical unit of the SS, the SS-Frauenkorps. He had to convince his subordinates that women should be respected not only for their biological contribution but also for their organizational skills. In a famous speech to SS generals in Poznań in October 1943, Himmler praised his colleagues for sending their daughters, sisters, brides, and girlfriends to the new elite training program. Appealing to the men's sense of chivalry and honor, he urged them to comply with this integration of women in the workforce as necessary for the war effort. As for the morale of his female recruits, Himmler visited the school

and reassured them that their office work in the SS would not degrade them; on the contrary, it would enhance their marriageability.

The presence and promotion of women in the SS workplace was not without its conflicts and tensions. The woman appointed first SS female superintendent of Birkenau, Johanna Langefeld, greeted Himmler when he visited Auschwitz on July 18, 1942. Her male colleague, the Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss, thought Langefeld was too assertive and questioned whether she was up to implementing plans for the large women's camp in Birkenau. Himmler insisted that a "women's camp must be commanded by a woman." He supported Langefeld's position as SS senior superintendent and warned that SS men were not to enter the female camp. Career tracks in camp and other bureaucracies opened up for women in the modern Nazi state, not in subordinate roles but in a hierarchy that placed them in commanding positions with unprecedented power, with the revered status of a uniformed government official.

When female administrators and guards abusively managed the prisoner population at a major camp or typed orders to carry out massacres of Jews and of Polish, Ukrainian, and Belarusian civilians who had been branded partisans, they helped make mass murder standard operating procedure. They lent their organizational know-how and individual skills to the machinery of destruction. In Warsaw, secret police secretaries handled the paperwork on reprisals against Polish political prisoners. What did this actually entail? As one clerk explained, "In the hallway, there was then a bunch of files, say a hundred files or so, and when then only fifty were to be shot it was in the women's sole discretion to choose the files. Sometimes the head of the division would say, 'This or that person must go, get rid of that piece of shit.'" Usually, though, "it was up to the receptionists to decide about who would be shot. Sometimes one of the women would ask her colleague: 'How about this one? Yes or no?'" This inside look at the Warsaw police department captures essential features of the Nazi terror — the paperwork behind it, its magnitude, its ideological fury, its routine randomness — and its dependence on women office workers.

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In Tarnopol (a town in present-day Ukraine, but in Nazi-occupied Poland during the war), a twenty-two-year-old typist in the Gestapo office noticed special meetings during August 1942, attended by all the SS men from the region. After such meetings, her boss informed her that the office would be empty the following day and that the women would have to "hold down the fort." When the male staff returned, they were in a festive mood and told stories about mass shootings, often in gruesome detail. The killing was done with a large plank, "like a diving board," which was placed over the mass grave. Jews were made to walk the plank and fell into the grave upon being shot by sharpshooters, who stood at a distance. SS policemen from the young typist's office carried out shootings in Tarnopol, Skalat, and Brezhany. One of the men approached her after returning from a massacre. He extended his hand to her and asked her to shake it. She refused, telling him it was dirty. "Yes," he replied, laughing, and he made a gesture as if firing a gun. Then he pointed to his uniform and boots and said, "Look, here is a drop of blood, and here still another, and another."

Sabine Dick, the secretary who worked in the Reich Security Main Office in Berlin before deciding to take a position in the office of the secret police in Minsk, did extend her hand to her bloodstained boss. When she arrived in Belarus she was a seasoned Gestapo secretary who had been on the inside for almost a decade. She was looking to advance her position and to increase her paycheck. She was promised the best assignment — she was to be personal secretary to Georg Heuser, a former law student, professional detective, and seasoned killer from Einsatzgruppe A. He would later be convicted by a West German court for the murder of 11,103 people.

Georg Heuser and Sabine Dick ran an efficient office and became friends. According to Dick's later testimony, when Heuser needed to issue orders for an *Aktion* against Jews, he would rush to his assistant's desk: "Sabine, quickly write this up!" Sabine Dick understood the code language of such orders: though Heuser might dictate to her something about the "thorough destruction of a ghetto in some place," the subject line rarely referred explicitly to Jews. Usually he had her draw up three sets of orders, one for each commander of a shooting

squad. She completed the paperwork, and it was Heuser who hand-delivered the orders to his unit commanders. Thus the orders were not widely circulated, and no duplicates were made for the files. Once such orders were issued, the atmosphere in the office was calm or sometimes even festive and relaxed. The men were relieved that they were not being called into real combat in antipartisan warfare. Shooting defenseless Jews was easier.

Orders issued for waging an antipartisan campaign were different. Many more details were committed to paper, including all the names of participants, the assignment of weapons, and the allocation of food and other supplies. In the orders that Sabine Dick typed for Jewish executions, there was no mention of food supplies. Instead, schnapps was requisitioned and given to the shooters. Those who joined the execution squads often returned drunk from the *Aktion* and went to the women's dormitory. Under the pretense that there were more reports to be typed, they dragged women from their rooms and, as another secretary put it delicately, "sought our company."

Antipartisan operations could last for weeks; mass shootings usually occurred on one day. All the SS policemen on staff were expected to carry out atrocities against civilians and partisans, but no one was punished if he refused to participate in an *Aktion* against the Jews or if he chose to stay in the office on the day of the massacres. Neither men nor women were required to carry out the genocide, and yet the Holocaust could not have been accomplished if a sense of duty had not prevailed over the sense of morality. In favoring perceived duty over morality, men and women were more alike than different.

Not long after Sabine Dick and her female colleagues arrived in the eastern territories at the end of 1941, they saw that Jews who lived there or who had been transported there from the Reich were being massacred. The Minsk Gestapo office, which employed at least ten female clerks, typists, bookkeepers, and translators, was an epicenter of the Holocaust. Many of the more notorious perpetrators of the Holocaust spent some time there, including Heinrich Himmler, who liked to make decisions on the spot and used killing sites in Belarus to test out murderous experiments with explosives and carbon monox-

ide. In Sabine Dick's office there were about a hundred Jewish workers who slept in the basement. The building also contained interrogation rooms and torture chambers. Some Jews were hanged in the courtyard; others were loaded onto gas vans in front of the office. This was the atmosphere of her workplace.

It is hardly surprising, then, that around the office Jewish deportees and prisoners were spoken of in nonhuman terms. In the culture of consumption, trade, and profiteering, a culture often dominated by German women, Jews were seen as commodities. When transports of Jews arrived in Minsk, the Gestapo office staff enjoyed an abundance of delicacies — which they called *Judenwurst*, Jewish sausage — stolen from the deportees. Nothing was to go to waste except the “human trash.” Often at the center of organizing and distributing Jewish goods and property, the secretaries in the office handled the plundered “Jewish sausage.” Before or after the Jews were killed, the secretaries prepared it, served it, and ate it with their male colleagues.

But Sabine Dick wanted more than Jewish food. Colleagues in the office spoke about a big farmhouse in Maly Trostenets, about eight miles outside of Minsk, that was stuffed with Jewish clothes and other personal items. The estate in Maly Trostenets was a labor camp and major receiving area where local Jews and Jews from the Netherlands, Austria, Czech lands, Germany, and Poland were shot in pits, then flattened with tractors. The farm and nearby forests would soon hold the largest concentration of mass graves of the Holocaust on Belarusian territory; estimates of Jews killed there range from sixty-five thousand to two hundred thousand. Many of those killed at Maly Trostenets were well-to-do and had brought their most valuable possessions with them from Hamburg, Frankfurt, and Vienna. When Dick's brother was killed in the war and she needed a mourning dress, she naturally thought of the depot in Maly Trostenets as a place where she could find one. SS *Obersturmbannführer* Eduard Strauch — Heuser's boss — remarked that it would not be appropriate for her, a German woman in her position, to wear Jewish things. But she took a dress anyway. She also secured a document from her dentist certifying that gold was needed for fillings in her teeth, and presented the certificate

to Georg Heuser. He gave her three Jewish wedding rings from the stash of gold kept in the office safe. After the war Dick claimed that the rings were lost in the chaos of the Allied bombings of her home. But investigators did not ask her to open her mouth.

The secretaries Liselotte Meier and Sabine Dick were at the very center of the Nazi murder machinery, and they, like so many others, chose to benefit from their proximity to power, plundering in depraved ways. The complicity of teachers, nurses, social workers, and resettlement advisors in the East was not as routine and widespread as that of secretaries (and, as we shall see, of wives). But it was significant nonetheless, and worth examining for the evidence it provides on how the genocide drew women into its operations, often in an ad hoc manner.

In mapping the presence of German women in the East, one can find them in large numbers in regions with high concentrations of ethnic Germans: in parts of Lithuania, Ukraine, and eastern Poland, and in settlements of tsarist Russia where German farmers and craftsmen had lived since the eighteenth century. With Hitler and Himmler envisioning these colonies as future Aryan utopias and Reich strongholds, young German women were charged with building up these settlements as the Führer's missionaries, also known as “culture bearers.”

One such ethnic German stronghold was wedged between Zhytomyr and Vinnytsia, where Hitler and Himmler established their top-secret headquarters in the summer of 1942. About one hundred women from the Reich arrived to transform local ethnic German youths into Hitler loyalists. As official representatives of the National Socialist Welfare Association, these colonial enthusiasts established forty-one kindergartens and several birthing centers and nursing stations. Midwives instructed young mothers about “racial hygiene.” Social workers and educators taught ethnic Germans that the Jews had set out to destroy the German people, and that the war was being fought against Jews who had surrounded and threatened to starve the Germans. They advised youths to protect the German race by following the Führer's example in not smoking or drinking.

They distributed photos of Hitler and swastika flags, and they taught young people Nazi songs. These ethnic Germans were often destitute but also quite receptive to the concepts of anti-Semitic scapegoating and vengeance: they had experienced Bolshevik terror in the 1930s, and they connected Jews with Bolshevism. German women, as culture bearers who worked diligently to indoctrinate ethnic Germans, were deadly enablers of the vengeance.

We have seen that within German occupation society was another female group, the wives of SS men. What is especially striking about these wives is that, unlike the secretaries, teachers, nurses, or "culture bearers," they were not officially given any direct role in the division of labor that made the Holocaust possible. Yet their proximity to the murderers and their own ideological fanaticism made many of them into potential participants. Others served as enablers.

Nazi leaders tried various measures to keep marriages intact during the war, such as laws against adultery. Wherever possible, they also encouraged wives of officials to go east for brief visits with their husbands. To travel, one had to possess a special pass to enter the occupied territories, which was arranged by the invitee, usually a husband, relative, or a boss in a government agency.

Vera Wohlauf, whose first marriage to a Hamburg merchant she had parlayed into a second one with an SS police officer, arrived in Poland in the summer of 1942. She and her new husband, Julius, had quickly made arrangements for a wedding ceremony during his furlough in late June, and Vera wasted no time in joining him in the East afterward.

Julius was scheduled to command one of three companies of Order Police Battalion 101 assigned to the liquidation of the Miedzyrzec-Podlaski ghetto on August 25–26, 1942. Over the course of these two days, more than eleven thousand Jews were gathered in the marketplace. Those who could not walk or who resisted deportation were beaten and shot. Many collapsed in the summer heat. The corpses of young and old, men, women, and children, approximately 960 bodies, lay scattered and in piles on the streets. After being herded to the train

station, where nearly sixty railway cars stood ready, the surviving Jews were shoved into the boxcars, as many as 140 people per car. Many were crushed and suffocated by the lack of space and air. Those who survived this deportation massacre were transported to Treblinka, where they were gassed upon arrival.

The morning of the massacre, Julius Wohlauf was late for duty. When his comrades arrived at their captain's residence, out strolled Vera, who jumped in the front seat of the truck, which was part of the convoy headed to Miedzyrzec. Perhaps there was still a morning chill in the air, or perhaps Vera wanted to dress the part, but she wore a military coat over her summer dress, and a cap.

Vera was not the only woman present at the massacre. Other wives of German officials and German Red Cross nurses were also there. The nurses were not tracked down after the war when Order Police Battalion 101 was investigated. The wives of some of the order policemen were. Vera was asked about this massacre in Miedzyrzec. She described it as a "peaceful, nearly idyllic resettlement to an eastern work camp." There were, however, witnesses who eventually testified otherwise. Vera Wohlauf was unusually conspicuous at the marketplace where the Jews had been assembled for deportation. She did not stand aside but circulated among the victims, demonstrating her power and humiliating them. Allegedly brandishing a whip, a status symbol for Nazi colonizers in the East, Wohlauf was also described in postwar testimony as being pregnant. Vera, a confirmed attention-seeker, placed herself at the center of the bloodshed in town. From the perspective of the Jews who had already suffered violent beatings and wild shootings in the Nazi roundup, Vera appeared as a persecutor, as "one of them."

The history of this *Aktion* has been studied by the Holocaust scholars Christopher Browning, Gudrun Schwarz, and Daniel Goldhagen. Each has analyzed the events and drawn different conclusions about one unusual aspect of this horrific massacre—the presence of Vera Wohlauf. In Browning's analysis, the men felt uncomfortable about her female presence at the massacre, which conjured up feelings of shame. Goldhagen, in contrast, stresses that the men of Police Battalion 101 were proud of their acts against Jews; Vera's incongruous preg-

nant presence merely reminded them that the dirty deeds of genocide were “man’s work.” But Browning and Goldhagen both analyze Vera’s presence and actions in relation to the German men, the killers, rather than examine her own agency at Miedzyrzec.

Two months before the massacre, Vera had the medical exam required for her to marry Julius. The doctor noted that Vera had menstruated in May 1942 and that she showed no signs of being pregnant. Vera gave birth in early February 1943, which means that during the August massacres she was in her first two months of pregnancy, with her first child. She would not have been visibly pregnant at this early stage, contrary to what was prominently featured in postwar recollections by Julius Wohlauf’s comrades and recounted by the wife of another order policeman in the unit. The information of her “condition” may have been revealed by Vera at the time of the massacre, or it may have been stressed in hindsight.

The wife of a lieutenant in the battalion testified after the war that the police commander held a “public” meeting after the Miedzyrzec *Aktion* “before a rather large gathering of officers and NCOs, and in the presence of various wives who were staying with their husbands as visitors, including also me.” The commander, Major Trapp, explained that killing actions were off-limits to women, since it was “outrageous that women who are in a state of pregnancy should witness such a thing.” In Hitler’s Germany, the female badge of honor was the pregnant belly. In the biologically driven culture of the Reich, German women were valued for their fertility. Women’s bodies and health were not their own private business; they were the subject of public discussion.

Vera Wohlauf’s pregnant presence was understood at the time and afterward as a double affront to the gender roles of men and women. An upstanding German woman at the center of the massacre was problematic enough for the men, who enjoyed the company of their wives on the front but wanted to set certain boundaries concerning women’s direct involvement in the bloodshed. Holocaust perpetrators and soldiers fought the war to defend Germany, epitomized in the image of the fertile mother. Embodying the home front, Vera crossed into a

war zone and the genocidal violence of the Holocaust. The reaction of Wohlauf’s comrades revealed confusion, perhaps a form of cognitive dissonance. The Jews as an abstraction, a phantom force, had to die so that Germans could live — so reasoned a Nazi perpetrator. Yet how could a habitual killer in a police unit in Poland rationalize the blood on his hands in the face of this young bride who mimicked his brutal actions? To uphold his honor and loyalty, he was supposed to carry out the grim task so that she could remain innocent.

Perhaps what disturbed Julius’s comrades most of all was that Vera, by all appearances a woman, behaved like a man. Her presence in Poland, along with that of the multitude of other German women who joined their husbands or worked in the occupation administration, tested and reshaped standards of conduct and sexuality. What women learned to do abroad was unacceptable behavior at home. This revolution was not a smooth process; it was fraught with tensions and conflicts, many of which continued to punctuate postwar testimonies and recollections of the genocide. While interesting to study on its own, the dissonance has also obscured the history of what Vera actually did as a direct participant in the Holocaust.

There were many German women who out of curiosity, cruelty, or other motives went to the crime scenes. As accomplices, they incited their male mates to kill while acting out in their own abusive ways. They spurned Jews in the ghettos and at railway stations. They confiscated and consumed Jewish personal belongings. They hosted parties when Jews were forced to leave their homes to face certain death at the mass shooting pits and extermination camps. Photographs from the ghetto liquidation at Hrubieszow show smiling German onlookers. As the Jews were marched to the train bound for Sobibor, the wives of overseeing SS policemen enjoyed coffee and cake. Photographs from a personal album of a member of Order Police Battalion 101 show Vera drinking beer with her husband and his colleagues. The photo was taken when she visited him in the summer of 1942. Was it taken on August 25 or 26, after the massacres in Miedzyrzec?

Mundane everyday activities and social, often intimate interactions



Vera and Julius Wohlauf enjoying refreshments, summer 1942

were intermingled with the genocidal violence of the Holocaust. The fact that Vera and Julius spent their honeymoon in the settings of the ghettos, mass executions, and deportations around Miedzyrzec, or that coffee and cake was served to the executioners and their wives as they watched the beating and deportation of Jews, demonstrates how systems of mass murder can become embedded in everyday life. The embedding, and the normalization that accompanies it, allows such crimes to occur unimpeded.

Female accomplices such as Liselotte Meier, Sabine Dick, and Vera Wohlauf were more than witnesses to the mass murder; they contributed in some capacity just short of pulling the trigger. Professional relations between men and women who developed efficient systems in their offices; the intimate dynamics between colleagues; the unholy alliances between Nazis and their lovers and spouses; the ambitions and anti-Semitic ideas of female professionals and Nazi fanatics — these were all forces that turned the utterances and declarations of Hitler and the sinister policies of Himmler into the horrific, everyday realities of the Holocaust.

The large number of female criminals — who stole from the Jews, administered the genocide, and participated at the crime scenes — are missing from our collective memory and official histories. The role of German women in Hitler's war can no longer be understood as their mobilization and victimization on the home front. Instead, Hitler's Germany produced another kind of female character at war, an expression of female activism and patriotism of the most violent and perverse kind.