

# Hitler's harpies

History professor Wendy Lower bemoans the scant attention that German women have received for their integral role in Nazi war crimes **By Tibor Krausz**

**IRMA GRESE**, a young blonde with a coquettish smile and a killer's stare, earned herself several monikers from the inmates of the Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps, where she worked as a warden during World War II.

"The Beautiful Beast," aka "the Beast of Belsen," and "The Hyena of Auschwitz" loved tormenting female prisoners by whipping them savagely and setting her guard dogs on them. Dolled up in tailored and perfumed finery, the actress wannabe strutted haughtily among bedraggled inmates, lording it over them with sadistic delight. In 1945 she was executed for crimes against humanity at age 22.

Ilse Koch, aka "the Bitch of Buchenwald," was another notorious Nazi harpy. The licentious wife of Commandant Karl-Otto Koch would reportedly scout around the death camps of Buchenwald and Majdanek in search of prisoners with tattooed skin. The tattoos' owners were promptly murdered and their inked skin, it was alleged, made into lampshades – and perhaps even gloves and handbags – for her. Sentenced to life in prison, she killed herself in 1967.

And let's not forget some of the other female Nazis who lent a hand to genocide. Maria "The Beast" Mandel, Auschwitz's female commandant, sent untold numbers of women and children to their deaths and adopted Jewish inmates as her "pets" before having them murdered too. Alice Orłowski, a guard at Auschwitz, threw children on top of their mothers into tightly packed gas chambers before bolting the doors shut. Dorothea Binz, an SS supervisor at Buchenwald, enjoyed torturing female prisoners, kicking one to death, killing another with an axe.

Shrinking violets these women weren't.

But nor were they the norm. They were the odd female sadists amid the Nazis' hordes of male mass murderers. Or so we've been led to believe. Most histories and popular accounts have depicted German women as long-suffering victims of the war: first, of heartbreak and privation with the men away at the front, then of mass rape and pillage by marauding Red Army soldiers.

**HITLER'S FURIES WERE NOT MARGINAL SOCIOPATHS – THEY WERE REPRESENTATIVE OF A WHOLE GENERATION OF GERMAN WOMEN**

Wendy Lower begs to differ. "Hitler's Furies were not marginal sociopaths," she stresses. Rather, they were representative of a whole generation of German women who came of age under Nazi rule in the 1930s – young, indoctrinated, ambitious.

A professor of history at Claremont McKenna College in California and an adviser to the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, Lower focuses on some lesser-known female accomplices and perpetrators. The historian says she spent two decades burrowing into archives, from Nazi documents to wartime diaries and correspondence to postwar court records, to see what German women were really up to during the war. Her verdict in "Hitler's Furies," a treatise on the activities of

women in German-occupied territories, is sobering. German women, she stresses, had a far larger role in the Holocaust than has been recognized.

The book puts paid to the popular notion, cultivated by German women themselves afterwards, that women were passive bystanders in a brutal war of genocide fought by men. "One-third of the female population [of 40 million in 1939], 13 million women, were actively engaged in a Nazi Party organization," Lower points out.

More than half a million of them, most still in their early 20s, ended up working in occupied Eastern Europe, from Ukraine and Poland to the Baltics, where special killing squads went about their grisly business of ridding the area of Jews and other undesirables to make way for a new population of Aryans. Inevitably, women there became privy to the quotidian realities of ongoing mass murder.

"There was no great distance between the settings of small towns, where women went about their daily routines, and the horrors of ghettos, camps and mass executions," Lower notes.

That much we've long known. What will come as a surprise to non-specialists is how many German women, indoctrinated by the regime's odious racial ideology, were willing accessories to the murder of *untermenschen* (subhumans) and did their homicidal work with alacrity that went well beyond the call of duty. Joining the ranks of tormentors, desk murderers and executioners were schoolteachers, nurses, social workers, secretaries and administrators.

They did so out of career ambition, a perverted sense of duty, or for personal gain and pleasure – frequently all three. Some of them were reasonably well-educated, others



A British soldier guards Bergen-Belsen warden Irma Grese, 22, photographed in August 1945 with Josef Kramer, the commandant of the concentration camp; both were convicted of war crimes and executed

less so. Some were barely out of their teens, others a decade or so older with children of their own. A trait they shared was a lack of scruples when it came to using, abusing and at times murdering people who came to be at their mercy.

At the forefront of genocidal zeal were those 40,000 women who worked as auxiliaries in the offices of the SS, the Gestapo, and colonial administrations. They participated in war crimes both at their desks as clerical enablers of mass murder and, less often, out in the field as hands-on executioners. By compiling and typing up lists of Jews and others for elimination, many administrators “contributed [to genocide] in some capacity just short of pulling the trigger,” Lower argues.

Other German women went a step further and busied themselves bringing meals and schnapps to *einsatzgruppe* soldiers during long hours of mass executions, cheering them on in the process. “In a small town of Latvia, a young female stenographer distinguished herself as the life of the party as well as a mass shooter,” the historian notes. But often the worst were the wives and lovers of SS men who “not only consoled their mates when they returned

from their dirty work but, in some cases, also bloodied their own hands,” she adds.

In Lida, Belarus, German women in fur coats accompanied soldiers on a romantic hunt in winter and, with no rabbits in sight, started shooting Jewish forced laborers plodding through the snow. The Germans found it jolly good fun, according to a Jewish eyewitness. Meanwhile, over in Lviv, in today’s Ukraine, the wife of the Janowska camp’s commandant entertained her guests by shooting Jewish laborers from the second-floor balcony of her villa with her young daughter by her side.

**LEGIONS OF** women served the regime in more subtle but no less repulsive ways. Teachers indoctrinated children in the noxious ideology of racial superiority and selected racially, physically or mentally wanting students for euthanasia. Nurses administered lethal injections to unsuspecting patients in mass-scale euthanasia projects, escorted children to gas chambers, and assisted in appalling medical experiments on inmates at concentration camps.

Some women recoiled, in private, at the scenes of brutality and slaughter, but

far too many suppressed whatever little sympathy they might have felt for Jews – emaciated, filthy and starving – whom they saw on sightseeing tours inside ghettos. They wrote home unsentimentally about the miserable inhabitants. “You mostly see just riff-raff loafing about,” Lower quotes a Nazi district chief’s daughter writing her lover about the residents of the ghetto in Lodz, Poland. “You know, one really can’t have any sympathy for these people.”

Johanna Altvater, a secretary turned self-appointed executioner, certainly felt no sympathy for the Jewish toddler she called over with the promise of a treat during her visit to the ghetto of the Ukrainian border town Volodymyr-Volynsky on September 16, 1942. “Altvater grabbed the child by the legs, held it upside down and slammed its head against the ghetto wall as if she were banging the dust out of a small carpet,” Lower explains, based on eyewitness testimony. “She threw the lifeless child at the feet of its father.”

The secretary shot other children, likewise lured with treats, through their expectantly gaping mouths with her small silver pistol. During the liquidation of the ghetto, the woman strode into the infirmary



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Maria Mandel after her arrest by US Army troops, August 10, 1945



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Ilse Koch, wife of Buchenwald camp commandant Karl-Otto Koch

and began throwing young children out of its third-story window.

In the Third Reich women had a strictly defined set of roles. They were expected to be productive and literally so: They were to become model German mothers who served the nation, like livestock, with a relentless reproductive cycle by churning out tiny little new Aryans as fast as their bodies could manage. Then when war came and their husbands went soldiering away on battlefields, women were exhorted to man the home front by tending homes, raising children, tilling the soil, and toiling away in factories.

But that didn't stop many of them from trying to get a piece of the action. Working in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe, German women found themselves free of the stifling social mores back home that relegated them to a second-class status of passive obedience. Many came to exercise their newfound freedoms and the powers invested in them by tormenting and killing people who they could now boss, bully and even kill on a whim. With pistols strapped to their hips, they swaggered around with a whip in hand, lashing out at their victims as the fancy took them.

It's apparent from the cases Lower cites that such Nazi harpies were driven by a

lethal combination of career ambition, gung-ho enthusiasm, and plain old *schadenfreude*. Women aren't immune, either, to the basest of human emotions that derives pleasure from the humiliation of one's "inferiors," and the East provided German women with plenty of opportunity to play boss over rounded-up masses of powerless victims.

By virtue of being members of Hitler's "master race," German women could lord it over Jews and other sub-humans, and many of them did. As a further enticement, they could also benefit financially by helping plunder the assets of dispossessed and murdered Jews. The Germans even had a word for the empowering rush they got from living it up hedonistically on stolen wealth while engaging in casual violence for fun and recreation. They called it *ostrausch*, or "eastern rush."

Lower shies away from psychoanalyzing female perpetrators, beyond pointing at studies that indicate women can easily turn violent by seeking to emulate male authority and by suppressing feelings of empathy for members of a hated group. She bemoans the scant attention that German women have received for what she sees as their integral role in Nazi war crimes.

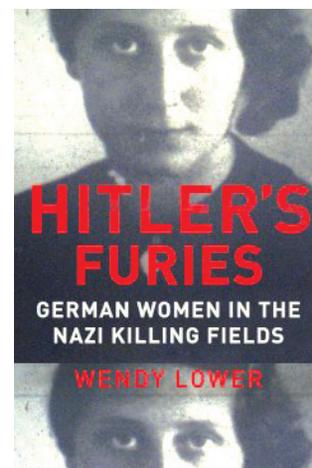
It's not as if historians of the era, who are

predominantly male, had never mentioned that role at all, but she is right that women have generally been treated as peripheral to those crimes. At just 200-odd pages long and at times meandering, episodic and repetitive, "Hitler's Furies" is no exhaustive study and falls short of being a seminal work; yet it's still an important book that deserves attention.

Most female culprits, Lower points out, simply returned to Germany and carried on with their lives in anonymity. Apart from a handful of high-profile murderers who were executed or sentenced to prison for their crimes, female suspects were handled with kid gloves by prosecutors and escaped being brought to justice. In their memoirs, interviews and depositions they kept mum about their wartime pasts, pleaded ignorance, prevaricated, rationalized their crimes, played the victim, and blamed anyone but themselves.

They frequently referred to the Holocaust as "that Jewish thing from the war." Even the sadistic child killer Johanna Altvater, who smiled smugly in court at witness testimonies, was acquitted in 1979 by a West German judge for an alleged lack of evidence. She died a free woman in 2003 at age 85.

Infuriating? Certainly. The Fuhrer's handmaidens, who did their master's bloody work well for him, got away with murder. ■



**Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields**  
By Wendy Lower  
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt  
288 pages; \$26