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Book Review: Women and the Nazi East: Agents and Witnesses of Germanization

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Women and the Nazi East: Agents and Witnesses of Germanization. Elizabeth Harvey. 2003. New Haven: Yale University Press. pp. 384. \$40.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by Nameeta Mathur¹

Women and the Nazi East is a masterful account of the “womanly task” within the Nazi Germanizing project that sought to *Germanize* the German peasantry in the eastern regions of the country bordering on Poland (also referred to as *ethnic Germans*) and the uprooted Germans from various locations in eastern Europe (such as Volhynia, Galicia, Bessarabia, and Bukovina) who were resettled in the conquered territories of Poland and referred to as *ethnic German settlers*. The book explains how some German women became missionaries of “Germanness,” and how this female activism positioned women as agents and witnesses of the Nazi regime’s “anti-alien” (anti-Polish) mission in the years before and during the course of the Second World War. Harvey explores how Altreich women (“old Reich,” or Germany in its border of 1937) attempted to nationalize a German borderland population that projected a specter of incoherent communities of hybrid nationality, uncertain loyalties, and conflicting religious groupings. As “brave pioneers,” these women embarked upon their pedagogical mission to “save” the borderlands from the perceived Polish threat by making the rural Germans on the frontier more German-like, i.e., loyal, disciplined, rational, efficient, physically fit, and, above all, masters of the Poles. But did women’s contribution to bringing German-style ethnic and racial order to what was habitually labeled Polish chaos influence the nature of female complicity in the oppression of the non-German population? Harvey explores this maximal question while dissecting the “racist maternalism” that enabled women to serve the Nazi regime alongside men.

Harvey explains why women partook in the project of creating a German-style domestic culture in the East. Organizations ranging from the NS-Frauenschaft (Nazi Women’s Group), NSV (National Socialist People’s Welfare), Women’s Labor Service, and the BDM (League of German Girls) assisted in the ordering, cleansing and domesticating dimension of the German colonizing process. Working in the East, either in education or social work, gave women manifold opportunities to become gainfully employed, to assume a flatteringly high-profile role, to enjoy their newly acquired freedom and responsibility, and to gain a rewarding experience that could assist in their future professional development. While some women were charmed by the colonization zeal, others expressed spontaneous enthusiasm, instead, for adventure and discovery. Genuine volunteers found their “caring” mission imbued with a grand historical significance that empowered them to serve as Reich Germans in positions of authority over alien races and ethnic Germans. However, those women drafted into the mission via informal and formal pressures were not always pleased to have been chosen.

Harvey provides a detailed description of the tasks that were required of women who ventured to the East. Reich German women were required to provide cultural and social amenities in order to build village community life for the ethnic Germans. This was achieved by encouraging the promotion of modern farming, the practice of German racial health and hygiene (as opposed to the supposed Polish-style passivity and fatalism in face of illnesses and infections), the rationalization of housewifery and childcare, use

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of the BDM gym kit, faith in Nazism and scorn for Poles, and substitutes for religious rituals (such as a secular naming ceremony instead of a Christian baptism, or replacing Polish images of saints with portraits of Hitler). German women also engaged in the task of clearing Polish homes and confiscating the household contents of the inhabitants to make way for ethnic German settlers from various locations. As female settlement advisers, women were required to combine motherly care for the settlers' well-being and condition of their homes with the political task of integrating settlers into the national community. At the same time, they also needed to monitor and police the settlers in all of their private and public matters, and "de-settle" those seen to be deviating from Nazi norms of conduct. Finally, in their roles as self-styled models of German fortitude and propagandists of Germandom, Reich kindergarten and elementary school teachers provisioned their schools with confiscated Polish and Jewish property, and created a physical separation between children classified as ethnic German and those categorized as Polish. The latter students were not necessarily to be truly educated; rather they were to be taught to understand and obey German.

Harvey makes it clear that the borderlands inhabitants were not always grateful when outside experts told them how to be proper Germans. The widespread arrogance and manipulateness of the colonizing Germans, and their propensity to infantilize ethnic Germans, caused for tensions between different groups of settlers (Baltic Germans, for example, were considered more Germanized than those from other areas) and between settlers and settlement advisers. However, the settlers' ability to resist interference was undermined by their relative insecurity in their new environment, the dependency of their land tenure on their good behavior, and their overwhelming need for the Reich to provide protection, welfare, and assistance.

In narrating, reporting, and memorializing their manifold experiences, German women appropriated the masculine and racist discourse of conquest and colonization, of Reich modernity over ethnic backwardness and Polish primitiveness, and of emerging German order triumphing over Polish chaos. In addition, and unlike male discourses, women emphasized "how the spaces of conquered Poland were filling with bustling womanly activism, of women's housewifery activities of tidying, scouring, laying out gardens." Some women experienced a "colonizing high" and retained myths of the great German achievements in the construction of the new east. Some, however, were frustrated by recalcitrant ethnic Germans, dismissive male colleagues, and by having to sacrifice their private lives for the "ethnic struggle." Other women could not solve the dilemma of believing in the German colonizing project while finding the regime that was implementing it repugnant. Some, unsettled and disturbed by the humiliation and degradation of the Poles and the stigmatization and persecution of the Jews, sought to subvert the Nazi measures of discrimination and exclusion. Still others chose the explicit gesture of ignoring the experiences of Jews and Poles, and opted, instead, to emphasize aspects that were more reassuring to German eyes. A few women sympathized with victims and chose to learn about the history of Poland and Polish-German relations. Regardless of the style of narrative and memory, Harvey emphasizes that women's activism remained inseparable from the policies of humiliation, eviction, and deportation of the non-German inhabitants.

Harvey's book, based on substantial primary and secondary sources, is a fascinating, path-breaking, and highly original account of how "women became cogs,

albeit minor ones, in the machinery of ethnic expulsion” and Nazi inhumanity. The book, however, is more than just a tale about German women’s activism in the East. It is a valuable source for those scholars interested in broadening their regional and transnational contexts of issues related to imperialism, colonialism, collective memory, perpetration and culpability, political indoctrination, and women’s varied identities and images. While there is some repetition in context and content, this small irritant is majestically overpowered by the fine scholarship that is worthy of emulation.