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Beautiful Monsters

Providence assigned to woman the cares of a world that is particularly her own, and it is only on this that man's world can be shaped and constructed. That is why these two worlds are never in conflict. They complement each other, they belong together, as man and woman belong together. We feel it is not appropriate when woman forces her way into man's world, into his territory; instead we perceive it as natural when these two worlds remain separate.

-Adolf Hitler¹

Though it was Adolf Hitler who spoke these words aloud, his speech reflected the feelings of many men and women in the Third Reich. According to Nazi ideology, it was the man's place to go out and provide monetary sustenance for the family while woman's existence was solely to serve as the carrier and cultivator of Nazi Germanic perfection. As Hitler later mentioned in the same speech,

What man offers in heroic courage on the battlefield, woman offers in ever-patient devotion, in ever-patient suffering and endurance. Each child that she brings into the world is a battle that she wages for the existence of her people. Both man and woman must therefore value and respect each other, when they see that each accomplishes the task that nature and providence have ordained.²

Clearly, Hitler felt that women, by "nature and providence," were meant to serve Germany as baby machines. The Nazis, however, as with many things concerning their regime, did not always practice what they preached. Though there have been many scholarly works written about the topic of women in the

Third Reich, this paper will focus on the many inconsistencies in Nazi ideology on women by using the Nazi SS-Aufseherin (female guard) Irma Grese, as well as a few other similar female examples, as case studies and examples of how the popular feminine ideal in the Third Reich was never as it appeared. Beginning with their indoctrination in Nazi ideology and concluding with their ultimate fate, this paper will seek to prove that Nazi women were just as capable of evil as men were.

The League of German Girls (BdM)

When Hitler and the Nazis came to power, they devised numerous ways to inundate the children of Germany with their doctrines. The most effective method for female children came in the form of the "League of German Girls," or BdM (*Bund Deutscher Mädel*). Created in 1930, the BdM was a Nazi "educational" program that taught young Aryan girls how to become the perfect Nazi citizens. The program was split into sections: The Young Girls League (*Jungmädel*) for girls from ages 10 to 14, and the League Proper for girls from 14 to 18. Eventually, a third section was added to the BdM for young women ages 17 to 21, called the Belief and Beauty Society (*Werk Glaube und Schönheit*).³ These Nazi youth groups, created for the sole purpose of benefitting the Reich, mimicked the many ranks in the actual Nazi Party structure.⁴ In March 1939, membership in the Hitler Youth for all young people 10 and up became mandatory for all those deemed racially pure. This was a precautionary measure to ensure that the desirable youth in the German population were fully indoctrinated in Nazi ideology to better serve the Third Reich and to teach younger girls and boys how to behave like perfect Nazi citizens.

What drove Nazi ideology was Hitler's urgent desire for a pure Aryan race. Women were not despised in Nazi Germany; in fact, they were revered as important and fertile instruments that would give birth to and raise the perfect German citizens. When asked if she had ever given any thought to fleeing Germany during Hitler's reign, Frau Margarete Fischer replied, "Nein, nein. I was too nationally minded for that. I wanted to will my strength to the children."⁵

The Hitler Youth made absolutely certain that this ideology was driven into the minds of all German adolescents, especially girls and young ladies. As a former official within the BdM, Jutta Rüdiger, explained in 1939:

Today, we all know that men and women, and boys and girls make up the nation, and that each has to carry out his duty to the nation according to his station. Boys will be raised as political soldiers, and girls as brave and strong women, who will be the comrades of these political soldiers – and who will go on to live in their families as women and mothers, and help shape our National Socialist world view – and to raise a new generation which is hard and proud. Therefore, we want to shape girls who are politically conscious. That does not mean women who debate or discuss things in parliament, but girls and women, who know about the necessities of life in the German nation, and act accordingly.⁶

It was perfectly acceptable for a woman to be aware of the political activities that took place around her (provided they coincided with Nazi ideology); however, women were to have no direct influence on important political decisions.

The “Bitch of Buchenwald”

For a great majority of young German women considered to be “racially pure,” the BdM served to alleviate the boredom of youth, and it gave many what they believed to be the chance to become a part of something bigger than themselves, something that brought about a sense of unity. As Melita Maschmann, a teenager during the Nazi takeover in Germany, explained,

Whenever I probe the reasons which drew me to join the Hitler Youth, I always come up against this one: I wanted to escape from my childish, narrow life and I wanted to attach myself to something that was great and fundamental. This longing I shared with countless others of my contemporaries...⁷

Many contemporaries of Maschmann, however, were women who deviated from the Nazi ideology of motherhood, and acquired reputations so notorious that they shocked many in the Western world once their heinous deeds were brought to light. Irma Grese was not the only female Nazi perpetrator within the SS. There were many others who deviated from the common Nazi ideology of motherhood with quite notorious reputations as well. One such woman was the wife of a commander of the Buchenwald concentration camp. Ilse Koch, the “Bitch of Buchenwald,” became

notorious for her extreme cruelty towards camp prisoners and sexual escapades with the other prison guards. Koch's most infamous alleged sin, however, comes from the numerous claims that she had the skin of deceased prisoners made into lampshades.⁸ Her notoriety was widespread by the end of the war, as can be seen by Gene Currivan's observations during his visit to Buchenwald after its liberation by the U.S. Army:

One of the first things that the German civilian visitors saw as they passed through the gates and into the interior of the camp was a display of 'parchment.' This consisted of large pieces of human flesh on which were elaborate tattooed markings. These strips had been collected by a German doctor who was writing a treatise on tattoos, and also by the 28-year-old wife of the *Standartenfuehrer* or commanding officer. This woman, according to prisoners, was an energetic sportswoman who, back in Brandenburg, used to ride to hounds. She had a mania for unusual tattoos, and whenever a prisoner arrived who had a rare marking on his body, she would indicate that that trophy would make a valuable addition to her collection. In addition to the 'parchments' were two large table lamps, with parchment shades also made of human flesh.⁹

Though researchers today still scrutinize these accusations, it is clear that Ilse Koch was known for her cruelty towards the prisoners of Buchenwald and she was believed by many to be capable of such a monstrous crime against humanity.¹⁰ Ultimately, Koch was sentenced to life imprisonment, but she went insane and committed suicide while incarcerated in 1967.¹¹

Aside from Koch there were other perpetrators, such as Dorothea Binz, who would beat, slap, kick, and whip inmates without any sign of mercy.¹² SS Guard Juana Bormann was known as "The Woman with the Dogs." She gained sadistic satisfaction by letting her wolfhounds loose on prisoners so that they could do her dirty work.¹³ Sadly, these women were not alone in their monstrous acts. There were also numerous others, the majority of whom gained their notorious reputations at Auschwitz-Birkenau, such as: Maria Mandel, Luise Danz, and Elisabeth Volkenrath. Though these women did not gain as much notoriety as their other female

comrades, their fates were ultimately similar. In total, over 3,600 women were employed in the concentration camps, but only 60 stood trial. Of these 60 women, only 21 were executed. Those who were not sentenced to death were either imprisoned for life, or given some alternate form of imprisonment and/or punishment.¹⁴

Although the Nazi Party's perception of women was one of purity and maternal strength, there were in fact quite a few women, though not nearly as many of them as men, employed at concentration camps as matrons or guards. According to survivors' accounts, these women, ranging from baronesses to prostitutes, were the most vicious among all of the guards. As Claudia Koonz argues in her book, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, the women who did end up as matrons and/or guards at the concentration camps most likely behaved in such abnormal ways because their occupations within the camps were so far removed from the popular Nazi ideology of the strong Nazi mother.¹⁵

Irma Ilse Ida Grese

Although many of the crimes committed by these women were, without argument, atrocious acts, there is one woman whose heinous deeds surpassed even Koch and her contemporaries. This young woman was christened Irma Ilse Ida Grese. Born in 1923 to Alfred and Berta Grese, Irma's family life and early years would eventually play a major role in her fanaticism with the Hitler Youth. Irma's father was a stern man who joined the Nazi Party in 1937. Irma probably learned much about the Nazi Party through her father, but he was not a fanatic. The actions of her mother Berta most likely caused Irma to immerse herself in the Hitler Youth. Berta, overwhelmed by life events (including her husband's infidelity) drank a bottle of hydrochloric acid with the obvious intent to kill herself. Although she was discovered by her husband and children and rushed to the hospital, they were unable to save her and in January of 1936, Berta Grese died. The young Irma was only twelve years old.¹⁶

Young Irma was not only deemed racially desirable by the Nazis, but she was also viewed as being a desirable member of the Hitler Youth because of her father's occupation as a dairy farmer. The Nazi regime held all youth in high regard; however, they held rural youth in even higher esteem because of their connection with the soil, which the Nazis viewed as a sacred entity. Irma left elementary school, for reasons unknown, at age fourteen. Somehow, from 1939 until the middle of 1941, Irma became an

assistant nurse's aide under the Senior Consultant of the nursing home and SS hospital, Professor Karl Gebhardt at Hohenlychen. However, Grese was apparently not very efficient at providing care to patients there. After two years of working as a nurse's aide, she was referred to Ravensbrück, a concentration camp located in northern Germany, where she would ultimately find her "true" calling as an SS-*Aufseherin*.¹⁷

Irma Grese first arrived at Ravensbrück in March of 1941; however, she was told to return in six months time when she would be eighteen and of the proper age to enlist for training. She waited over a year to return to the facility and when she did so, she volunteered for the auxiliary guard service. This presents an important and startling fact: Irma Grese chose to be an active service member and camp guard. As Daniel Patrick Brown points out in his book, *The Beautiful Beast*, there is clearly a difference between women who were drafted into SS service and those who volunteered for it.¹⁸ As previously explained, Grese came from a modest family with a tragic history that likely still haunted her in her later years when she opted to be employed in the SS. Grese also apparently possessed less-than-average intelligence and, as Brown points out in his study, strongly exhibited "frustration-aggression syndrome," in which an "abused" child grows up to do the same to his/her own children (in Grese's case, her prisoners) because of her highly traumatic childhood. All of these elements likely made Grese highly susceptible to the machinations and the promises of the Third Reich.¹⁹ This is not presented as a justification for Grese's actions, but merely as a means of attempting to explain the inner workings of the woman's mind. The fact is that Grese and other female guards within the camps behaved atrociously and committed heinous crimes against humanity. Grese's crimes began with the "training," or beating, of inmates. Apparently, through this, Grese discovered she received some form of sadistic pleasure when witnessing the pain of others, especially when she was the one inflicting it.

Irma Grese remained at Ravensbrück for seven months where she primarily oversaw work details, or *Arbeitskommandos*. In March of 1943, she was transferred to the infamous concentration camp Auschwitz, initially as a telephone operator. Soon, however, she was promoted to the higher position of camp guard. Through this occupation she earned her notorious reputation, becoming both feared and hated within the Nazi camp. Olga Lengyel, a Hungarian prisoner at Auschwitz-Birkenau describes her: "When she [Grese]

walked through the camp [Birkenau] with a whip in her hand she reeked with the smell of cheap perfume."²⁰ The cellophane "whip" became her trademark, especially for the prisoners who were witness to (or victims of) the whip's stinging lash during "*Sport Machen*" when the camp guards would beat and torture the already weakened inmates. Though Grese disputed ever using the whip on inmates, many prisoners later testified to the contrary. Prisoners such as Ilona Stein provided eyewitness accounts of Irma Grese's brutality with both the whip and her fists:

Earlier Miss Grese had seen a mother and daughter talking through a barbed wire fence separating two parts of the camp. This was forbidden and Miss Grese rode over on a bicycle and beat the daughter until blood ran down her chest. Both had to be taken to a hospital... She often beat people with her riding whip. When people were being loaded on trucks to be taken to the crematorium, Miss Grese would push them about and hit them with a stick. I did not have much to do with Miss Grese, so she beat me only once when someone started talking to me through the wire.²¹

Grese was also rumored to have a voracious and sadistic sexual appetite that she seems to have gained through her intimate association with the notorious "Angel of Death," Dr. Josef Mengele.²² However, according to camp survivors Isabella Leitner and Olga Lengyel, Grese also had homosexual affairs with prisoners (which strongly violated the Race and Resettlement Act) and, once he learned of her "unnatural" proclivities, Mengele called the affair off.²³

While at Aushwitz-Birkenau, Grese continuously proved to be a walking, talking contradiction of the female Nazi ideology that placed Aryan women on a pedestal, especially those who "did their duty to their country" and bore many healthy children. It would appear that Irma Grese's numerous sexual proclivities soon caught up with her. According to the writings of Gisela Perl, a Jewish inmate physician at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Grese approached her and demanded an examination to determine if she might be pregnant. Grese was indeed pregnant, and the next day the two women met again (on Grese's orders, as the Nazi Racial Law prohibited Jews from touching Aryans) and the fetus was aborted.²⁴ Grese, arguably a fine specimen of "Aryan

Womanhood," was employed as an *SS-Aufseherin*, supposedly to help the German cause, yet she secretly thwarted the Nazis through many of her actions, especially this one. For a pure, Aryan woman, even if the child she bore were illegitimate, that child was still considered by the Nazis to be a "valuable" member of German society. An Aryan abortion was explicitly prohibited within Nazi Germany.



Figure 1²⁵

Though transferred to Ravensbrück for a short amount of time in January of 1945, Irma Grese was quickly reassigned to Bergen-Belsen in March of 1945. By the time Grese had arrived at Bergen-Belsen, the camp was most commonly referred to as a "sick camp." Though her stay at Bergen-Belsen lasted less than a month, Grese resumed the "Sport" she and the other guards had so enjoyed inflicting upon the previous inmates at both Ravensbrück and Auschwitz. It was here, at Bergen-Belsen, that Irma Grese would acquire her infamous nickname, "The Blond Bitch of Belsen." Even though the collapse of the Third Reich was close at hand and many of the SS guards were aware of the fact, Grese apparently did not prepare herself for the consequences of her actions in the camps and continued behaving in a cruel and depraved fashion toward the camp prisoners. Perhaps she did not

care about the Third Reich's collapse, or, perhaps she just could not stop herself at this point. Either way, Grese herself acknowledged her awareness of the frequent deaths all around her in the camp and she also maintained that she "never tried to gain favor with inmates, even when she knew Germany would lose the war."²⁶ Bergen-Belsen was liberated on April 15, 1945 and the SS camp guards, had any of them ever doubted Germany's defeat, were quickly brought to the harsh reality of their increasingly ominous situation.

Irma Grese and her SS comrades were tried by English law in what came to be known as "The Belsen Trial," even though the crimes committed had also occurred at Auschwitz and other camps as well. The defense openly confirmed that Irma Grese had committed atrocities in both Aushwitz-Birkenau and Belsen.²⁷ Grese dug an even deeper hole for both herself and her comrades by testifying that all members of the SS were guilty:

But I suppose I have as much guilt as all the others above me. I mean by this that simply by being in the SS and seeing crimes committed on orders from those in authority and doing nothing to protest and stop them... makes anybody in the SS as guilty as anybody else. The crimes I refer to are gassing people at Oswiecem and the killing of thousands at Belsen by starvation and untended disease. I consider the crime to be murder.²⁸

Therefore, by her own confession, Irma Grese implicated herself and her fellow SS colleagues in mass murder.

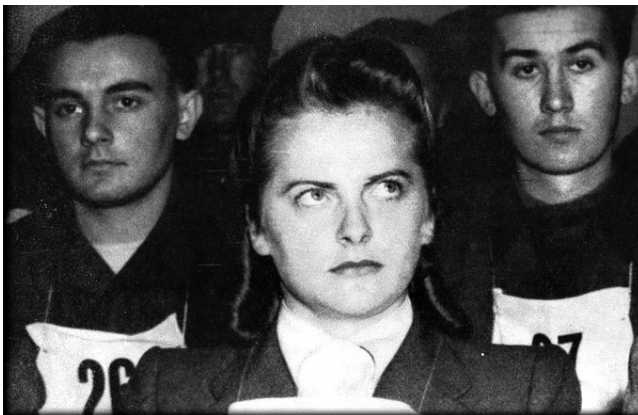


Figure2²⁹

On November 17, 1945, Irma Ilse Ida Grese, along with several others, was sentenced to death for crimes committed at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen, and was executed on December 13, 1945.³⁰ Just like that, one of the great and infamous terrors of the SS was gone forever. Never again would the "Beautiful Beast," as she was referred to by journalists during the Belsen Trial, be able to physically harm another poor soul for the sake of Germany and the "Führer." Irma Grese, like many others in her position in the SS, had started out as a decent human being with so much positive potential, but eventually ended up being severely contorted by the tragedies of life and the devious machinations of the Third Reich. Nevertheless, one must also not forget that Grese was a human being capable of making her own decisions, whether consciously or not. Like many of her German contemporaries who were on a quest to discover who they really were (many of them also finding their place within the Reich), Irma Grese appeared to have found her life's purpose through SS employment and at the expense (and lives) of numerous helpless concentration camp prisoners.

Motivations for Evil

Over 3,600 women were employed as a means to further advance the Nazi cause. Everything about the *SS-Aufseherin* in the Nazi concentration camps was a contradiction. The mere presence of women workers in these camps was a contradiction to the Nazi doctrine that stated that a woman's place was in the home. Nazi social policy clearly stated that women of pure Aryan blood were to bear many children for the sake of the Führer and, subsequently, the State.³¹ However, women such as Irma Grese and Ilse Koch defied the strict edicts proclaimed by the German state that placed woman's status beneath that of man, even as they fanatically embraced much of the Nazi ideology that had placed such a large chasm between the two sexes. What drove these women and their many female contemporaries to join such a contradictory political party? One could argue that it is human nature for each individual to be contradictory in some way, and they may be right to some degree; however, these women were thoroughly convinced that Germany, and their Führer, were in the right for their deplorable actions towards the Jews and others they considered to be enemies of Germany.

The answer can most likely be found in the explanations of the majority of historians of Nazi women such as Claudia Koonz and

Daniel Patrick Brown, and of contemporaries of Nazi Germany such as Melita Maschmann. All argue that it was German women's desire to be a part of something larger and more important than just themselves as individuals. Another major factor was most probably the liberty and freedom of individuality such positions allowed within the concentration camps. This is where much of the cruelty and depravity can likely be accounted for, since, as Koonz says, Nazi women were so far removed from their "normal" pure and nurturing environment that they had no real direction to go save for the brutal one provided for them by the SS. Regardless of their individual motivations, all of these women deviated from the popular Nazi ideology of "Aryan Womanhood," while still playing major roles in the Nazi Regime. Were these women just following the orders given by their superiors? Judging by their cruel and depraved acts, such as Irma Grese's sexual escapades and Ilse Koch's mania for unusual body art, almost certainly they were not. These women were more than just the executors of their superiors' abominable commands. They were individuals capable of making their own immoral decisions, as they have so clearly shown, with or without the permission of their male superiors. These women, these mass-murderesses, were more than comely Nazis obeying orders. They were more than just individuals who discovered a cause they felt was right and decided to join. They were much more than just guards with whips and hateful, yet attractive, visages in a concentration camp. These women of the SS Guard were well and truly monsters.

Notes

- 1 Adolf Hitler, "Speech to the National Socialist Women's Organization," September 8, 1934, in *The Nazi State and German Society*, ed. and trans. Robert Moeller (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's Publishing, 2010), 80.
- 2 *Ibid.*, "Speech," 81.
- 3 "Bund Deutscher Mädel: The League of German Girls" (1930), <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Holocaust/BDM.html> (accessed October 29, 2010).
- 4 D. P. Brown, *The Beautiful Beast* (Ventura, CA: Golden West Historical Publications, 1996), 16-17.
- 5 Quoted in Alison Owings, *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 9.
- 6 Jutta Rüdiger, "On the League of German Girls," in Moeller, *The Nazi State*, 85.
- 7 Melita Maschmann, "A German Teenager's Response to the Nazi Takeover in January 1933," in Moeller, *The Nazi State*, 49.

- 8 "1937: Quiet Before the Storm" <http://www.holocaustchronicle.org/StaticPages/117.html> (accessed November 7, 2010).
- 9 Gene Currivan, "Report on a Visit to a Nazi Concentration Camp Liberated by the U.S. Army," 18 April 1945, in Moeller, *The Nazi State*, 179.
- 10 "Dachau Trials: The Trial of Ilse Koch," <http://www.scrapbookpages.com/dachauscrapbook/DachauTrials/IlseKoch.html> (accessed November 8, 2010).
- 11 "1937: Quiet Before the Storm."
- 12 Brown, *The Beautiful Beast*, 35.
- 13 "Juana Bormann" <http://www.auschwitz.dk/women/Bormann.htm> (accessed November 8, 2010).
- 14 "Female Nazi War Criminals" <http://www.capitalpunishmentuk.org/nazigirls.html> (accessed November 8, 2010).
- 15 Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 404.
- 16 Brown, *The Beautiful Beast*, 11-14.
- 17 Ibid., 24-26.
- 18 Ibid., 27-28.
- 19 Ibid., 15.
- 20 Ibid., 43-44.
- 21 "Belsen Tortures By Woman Listed," *New York Times*, September 27, 1945.
- 22 "Angel of Death: Josef Mengele" <http://www.auschwitz.dk/mengele.htm> (accessed 7 November 2010).
- 23 Brown, *The Beautiful Beast*, 50-51.
- 24 Ibid., 54.
- 25 Figure 2, "A photograph of Irma Grese in her SS guards uniform," <http://www.scrapbookpages.com/bergenbelsen/BergenBelsen08.html> (accessed November 2, 2010, public domain).
- 26 Brown, *The Beautiful Beast*, 62-66.
- 27 Ibid., 76-79.
- 28 "Belsen Girl Guard Blames All of SS," *New York Times*, October 6, 1945.
- 29 Figure 2, "Two male former SS prison guards and Irma at trial," <http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/staff/staffphotographs.asp?campstaffid=53&photographsid=725&index=25> (accessed 3 November, 2010, public domain).
- 30 Brown, *The Beautiful Beast*, 93.
- 31 Koonz, *Mothers*, 3.