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Dawn of the New Women in Sports, Fashion, and Employment: Challenging Gender Roles in the Weimar Republic

The Weimar Republic was an era in German history that followed World War I and ended with the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. The Treaty of Versailles ended World War I and ultimately led the German public to feel resentful towards the harsh measures included in the peace treaty. A struggling economy, cultural creativity, and modernization became qualities that defined the reality in Weimar Germany. The twenties were a golden time for experimentation, a decade during which gender norms in Germany were beginning to evolve. It is this era that I focus on in explaining why gender roles and representations changed.

Why did gender roles and representations change in Germany in the 1920s? That is the primary question I seek to answer in this piece. The rise of the new woman was instrumental for the change in gender norms in the Weimar Republic. The “new woman” was an ideal championed by feminists, an ideal that allowed women to break out of traditional roles. The economic, social, and cultural developments after World War I in Germany are the primary themes I will address alongside the mindset of the “new woman” to support my argument that these changes challenged traditional gender roles and representations.

The new woman that appeared in the 1920s Weimar Republic of Germany can be traced back to the feminist movement in the late nineteenth century. The Union of German Feminist Organization (Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine) was founded in 1894.¹ It went on to expand and combine with other women’s rights groups. It was one of the leading groups that promoted equality with men regarding higher education and employment. The Union of German Feminist Organizations was made up of

mostly upper class women and went so far as to not allow lower or middle class women to join as members. Feminists of the lower or middle class instead joined socialist groups.² The Union of German Feminist Organization continued to grow in members, eventually totaling a membership of 300,000 before the start of World War I.³ Some prominent influential members and leaders of this organization were Helene Langer, Gertrud Bäumer, and Marianne Weber, some of whom contributed to newspaper articles and books promoting their ideas. While this organization was very influential with regards to women's suffrage and educational reform, sexual liberation of women was not one of its goals because it was a conservative group. Sexual liberation was not an aspect of the new woman that was promoted or pursued by this organization. It did have great influence throughout the 1920s, until the rise of Nazism. The rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party in the early 1930s caused a regression back to traditional women's roles in German society. The Union of German Feminist Organizations ended in 1933 with the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party.

Higher education was one area where feminist organizations saw an opportunity for women, and success can be seen in enrollment numbers of that era. A compilation of data for the enrollment in academic institutions of higher education can be seen in Table 1. According to the statistics provided by the website German History in Documents and Images, this enrollment accounts for universities and polytechnic, veterinary, agricultural, forestry, business, and philosophical-theological colleges, sports and mountaineering academics; not included are teachers' colleges, and art and music schools.⁴

As seen in the table below, the number of female students who pursued higher education grew markedly during World War I and continued to grow steadily after. The total number of students, both female and male, is much lower during the war years and can be attributed to fewer men pursuing higher education to join the war effort. The total number of female students grew incrementally, especially during the late 1920s. The

highest total of female students in this table occurred during the spring semester of 1931.

*CHANGES IN ENROLLMENT AT ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS
OF HIGHER EDUCATION⁵*

Semester/Year	Students			
	Total	Number of Female Students	% of Female Students	Students per 10,000 Residents
SS 1914	79,511	4,313	5.4	11.7
WS 1914/15	36,201	7,409	20.4	5.3
SS 1915	22,900	4,813	21	3.3
WS 1915/16	20,010	4,927	7.6	2.9
SS 1916	22,225	5,793	26.1	3.2
SS 1917	23,387	7,752	32.3	3.4
SS 1918	25,430	7,573	29.8	3.8
WS 1918/19	46,180	7,861	17	6.9
SS 1919	100,133	8,578	8.5	15.9
WS 1919/20	115,336	8,335	7.2	18.3
SS 1920	115,633	8,676	7.5	18.7
WS 1920/21	119,609	8,693	7.2	19.3
SS 1921	120,196	8,890	7.4	19.2
SS 1922	120,557	8,882	7.4	19.7
SS 1923	125,306	9,883	7.9	20.3
WS 1923/24	114,363	9,421	8.2	18.5
SS 1924	100,751	8,368	8.3	16.3
WS 1924/25	93,566	7,532	8	15.1
SS 1925	90,970	7,612	8.4	14.6
WS 1925/26	87,348	7,637	8.7	14
SS 1926	95,255	8,539	9	15.1
SS 1927	101,005	10,336	10.2	15.9
SS 1928	111,582	12,894	11.5	17.5
SS 1929	122,374	15,955	13	19.1
SS 1930	129,708	18,813	14.5	20.2
SS 1931	134,767	21,195	15.7	20.8
WS 1931/32	126,632	20,256	16	19.6
SS 1932	127,580	19,998	15.7	19.6

The way World War I affected the creation of the Weimar Republic is vital to understanding the environment that allowed for the evolution of gender roles. The German people were in a state of shock following the loss of World War I. Most Germans did not know they were on the losing side during the war due to propaganda. Germans who fought in the war returned to Germany enraged at their government for the armistice. The Treaty of Versailles concluded the war, burdening Germany with the most blame and the harshest reparations. The economic effects of the Great War would prove to last long into the next decade. Germany lost a total of 1,796,000 soldiers to the fighting of World War I.⁶ The German workforce was in shambles following the war with this sheer number of losses. The “war-guilt clause,” as it was known in the Treaty of Versailles, planted the seed of resentment that steadily grew throughout the twenties, up to the death of the Weimar Republic when Adolf Hitler rose to power.

The constitution drafted after World War I created the Weimar Republic of Germany in 1919, though not without opposition. The struggle stemmed from a lack of faith in the government and political opposition from the German Communist Party. The government fundamentally changed with the Treaty of Versailles, even before the new constitution was drafted. Before the treaty, Germany had been led by a Kaiser, otherwise known as an emperor. Kaiser Wilhelm II was the last German emperor as his reign ended with the conclusion of World War I. As a condition, the Kaiser was to abdicate, and Germany was to form a new, democratic government in his place. This new government was then forced to sign the Treaty of Versailles, leading to public distrust. Some politicians deemed this a “stab in the back” to the German public. This was only a conspiracy, however, as Germany had no power to negotiate the treaty.

The new democratic government passed a constitution in 1919 called the Weimar Constitution that declared women and men equal.⁷ Women gained suffrage and were granted equal civil rights, but the new constitution carried over some of the old laws and restrictions that affected women such as marriage laws and

the legality of abortion. These holdovers reveal that Germany was still very much a patriarchal society.

Alongside the new government came new ideas. Modernization was a key idea that helped lead the way to the new woman in Weimar Germany. Fashion, hairstyles, and sexual liberation were all informed by the idea of modernization and in turn, the new woman. Women's fashion changed dramatically during the Weimar Republic. As shown in Figure 1, women adopted the pageboy hairstyle early on in the Weimar Republic. Modernized hairstyles such as this were not met with enthusiasm by some German men. Conservative Germans comprised the most opposition and marked it as the downturn of society and culture. Socially liberal Germans, however, saw it as a proud achievement in modernization and sexual liberation, both of which they supported. The goal for women who styled their hair in this manner was to distance themselves from the past and tradition in order to liberate themselves as new women.⁸ Because the hairstyle was shorter in length than traditional styles, it was an indication of masculinity. Therefore, it emulated the patriarchal society by being a symbol of empowerment; the promise of sexual liberation took away the confinements of the patriarchal society. It was very divisive among Germans.

The controversy surrounding women's fashion reached its zenith for one writer for the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* in 1925. In an article titled, "Enough is Enough! Against the Masculinization of Women," the anonymous author bashed women's fashion. The author said, "At first it was like a charming novelty" when women adopted new bobbed hairstyles and dresses that were "denying the contours of the female body."⁹ The author insinuated that these new styles were seen as acceptable to even the most conservative of men in the Weimar Republic. The author went on to compare these new women to angels because both could then be considered "asexual," as if new women lost their femininity.¹⁰ The problem, the author stated, was that the new fashion "did an aesthetic disservice to stately and full-figured women." He continued, "But the trend went even further; women no longer wanted to appear asexual, rather fashion was

increasingly calculated to make women's outward appearance more masculine."¹¹ The main complaint was the change in gender roles that resulted in women adopting a more masculine appearance. It is a very powerfully worded article, as the author feels strongly that women should embrace the traditional gender roles and feminine physique of the past rather than the liberated new woman.

Besides fashion, the Weimar constitution was instrumental in expanding employment for women. Aspects such as the equality of women and men that was included in the new Weimar constitution were felt here. Before the expansion of employment opportunities, women were largely responsible for the household. The triad of *Kinder, Kirche, Küche* (children, church, kitchen) were the primary domains of women prior to the Weimar Republic. However, these three domains prevailed even when combined with employment.

There are elements of the new woman regarding employment that can clearly be seen in literature written during the Weimar era. The novel *Little Man, What Now?* by Hans Fallada offers a glimpse into a young family's life during the Weimar era. Fallada's story was originally serialized in a magazine and was later published as a novel in 1932 due to a rise in popularity. The story became popular due to its relevance and characters that were easy to identify with. The main characters are Johannes Pinneberg, his wife Emma, and their child. The story follows them through their struggles and accomplishments. Johannes Pinneberg is the sole provider for the family in the beginning of the story, but just as high unemployment hit the Weimar Republic in the late 1920s, the author mirrored the event resulting in Johannes losing his job. This shows that Fallada's story was contemporary at the time. In the novel, Emma Pinneberg begins to show signs of a transition to the new woman after Johannes loses his job. In the beginning of the story she seems to be content with her role as a housewife, although perhaps not always comfortable filling the traditional role expected of her in the family. With Johannes losing his job and becoming unemployed indefinitely, the roles of husband and wife are switched. Emma then provides for the

family while Johannes cares for their baby and the home. By taking on this role, Emma has shown that she possesses the capacity not only to provide for her family but also to be self-reliant. Economic independence, or at least the opportunity to achieve it, was very important to the new woman.

Related to the rising independence of the new woman was the growth of sports during the Weimar era. In May 1926, the German journal *Kulturwille* published an article that connected working and sport. Competition is the root for both work and sport according to author Fritz Wildung, who writes that “people never lose this drive to play.”¹² Working helps people to express creativity and motivation that is driven by play. The importance of sports to women during the Weimar era can be seen in the second illustration. A high profile tennis player and fashion designer Paula von Reznicek assembled and published a book containing art depicting women athletes.¹³ The second illustration, below, depicts a woman training on the left-hand side and on the right-hand side is a woman talking on a telephone. I interpret Reznicek’s art as a shift from what was previously known as femininity to masculinity. The fact that the woman in this image is boxing without a shirt conveys equality to men and comfort with her own body. Each woman has a shorter, modern hairstyle, too.

Reznicek was a staunch proponent for the increased participation of women in sports. She believed that sports were important for women to become assertive and more active in society.¹⁴ Not only did the growth in sports liberate women in the Weimar Republic, but it also was of great importance to men in order to feel more masculine. Boxing grew to become a popular sport in Germany and served as an opportunity for men to reclaim their perceived loss of male masculinity after the defeat of World War I. Boxing symbolized the “Greek physical and spiritual ideal.”¹⁵ The loss of the Great War was emasculating for German men, and boxing was an outlet to regain masculinity for their gender. In addition, the economic downturn in the late 1920s in which many men lost their jobs diminished competition for men. Sports were a replacement that filled the need for competition, contributing to the growing popularity of sports.

The change in gender roles in the 1920s was not exclusive to Germany. In fact, it was a worldwide phenomenon that occurred in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas. Shanghai, Berlin, London, and other major cities were prime environments for the change in gender roles. According to Carol Schmid, writer of an article in the *Journal of International Women's Studies* comparing interwar Berlin and Shanghai, "The anonymity of the cities, a change in work force and new possibilities in urban life produced a transformation in many women's lives."¹⁶ Large cities allowed women and men to get lost in the mix and become

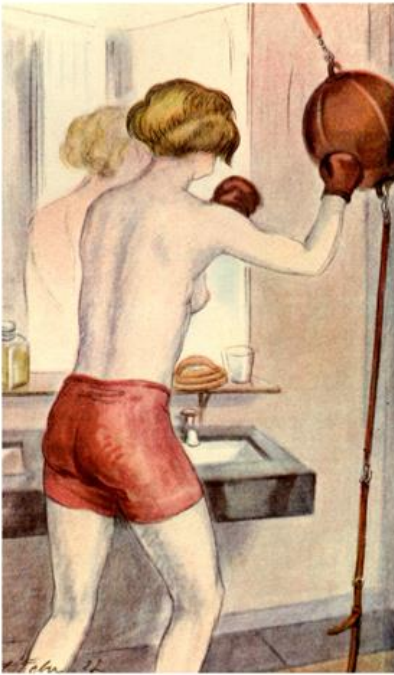


STRIPED BATHING SUIT, BY ERNST SCHNEIDER, 1925¹⁷

more independent in thought and identity. Experimentation was encouraged. In the monograph, *The New Women in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling Under Communism*, Marianne Kamp shows that the lifestyles of women in Uzbekistan during the early twentieth century were changing in ways that were

highly challenging to their patriarchal society. While the advent of the new woman was not unique, the circumstances and the factors involved set each society apart. The Uzbek society, for example, was evolving and leading to the introduction of new women but was brought about through outside influence and the change was met with violence.¹⁸

A European example of gender roles being influenced by World War I can be observed in Britain. Women of Britain also had an opportunity to work in order to support the war effort.



FROM *RESURRECTION OF THE LADY*,
BY PAULA VON REZNICEK, 1928¹⁹

However, because of demands of equality by the British feminist movement, tensions arose after the war. The tension was sparked by a divide between men who wanted recognition upon their return from the war and women with their newfound independence.²⁰ Men saw the advent of the new woman as a

challenge to traditional gender roles and women were reluctant to regress back to traditional roles, and assume their previous lives as housewives.

The change in gender roles and representations during the Weimar era is a complex issue that cannot be easily pinpointed in one exact area. I have argued that World War I was the catalyst for gender roles to change, as it created an environment with certain conditions within Germany. The creation of the Weimar Republic would not have occurred without the loss of World War I. The casualties of war were a significant factor because such a large portion of the workforce was lost. This turned out to be an opportunity for women to fill that employment gap. The new woman developed during this time period as sports, modernized fashion, and employment opportunities expanded because of this new environment. These developments allowed women to liberate themselves, leading to the formation of the new woman in the Weimar Republic.

Notes

¹ Diane J. Guido, *The German League for the Prevention of Women's Emancipation: Antifeminism in Germany, 1912-1920* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 3.

² Patricia M. Mazón, *Gender and the Modern Research University: The Admission of Women to German Higher Education, 1865-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 53.

³ *Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 195.

⁴ *Sozialgeschichtliches Arbeitsbuch*, Volume III, *Materialien zur Statistik des Deutschen Reiches 1914-1945*, edited by Dietmar Petzina, Werner Abelshäuser, and Anselm Faust (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1978), accessed November 11, 2014, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=4342.

⁵ *Sozialgeschichtliches Arbeitsbuch*, Volume III, *Materialien zur Statistik des Deutschen Reiches 1914-1945*, edited by Dietmar Petzina, Werner Abelshäuser, and Anselm Faust (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1978) accessed November 11, 2014, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=4342.

⁶ Boris Uralnis, *Wars and Population* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 85.

⁷ Carol Schmidt, "The 'New Woman', Gender Roles and Urban Modernism in Interwar Berlin and Shanghai," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 15, no. 1 (January 2014): 5, accessed November 12, 2014.

⁸ Ernst Schneider, *Striped Bathing Suit*, 1925, German Historical Documents and Images, German Historical Institute, Washington, DC, accessed November 12, 2014, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=4239.

⁹ "Enough is Enough! Against the Masculinization of Women" in *Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 659.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Fritz Wildung, "Sport is the Will to Culture," in *Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 681.

¹³ Paula von Reznicek, *Untitled*, 1928, *German History in Documents and Images*, German Historical Institute, Washington, DC, accessed November 12, 2014, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=4248

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ German Historical Documents and Images, *Max Schmeling Trains*, 1931, *German History in Documents and Images*, German Historical Institute, Washington, DC, accessed November 12, 2014, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=4251.

¹⁶ Carol Schmid, "The 'New Woman', Gender Roles and Urban Modernism in Interwar Berlin and Shanghai," 2.

¹⁷ Ernst Schneider, *Striped Bathing Suit*, 1925, German Historical Documents and Images, German Historical Institute, Washington, DC, accessed November 12, 2014, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=4239.

¹⁸ Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling Under Communism* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2006), 186.

¹⁹ Paula von Reznicek, *Untitled*, 1928, *German History in Documents and Images*, German Historical Institute, Washington, DC, accessed November 12, 2014, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=4248.

²⁰ Sarah Bramham, "Blurring the Lines: World War I and the Dismantling of the Victorian Gender Order in Britain." *New Histories*, April 26, 2012, accessed December 1, 2014, <http://newhistories.group.shef.ac.uk/wordpress/wordpress/blurring-the-lines-world-war-one-and-the-dismantling-of-the-victorian-gender-order-in-britain/>.