

# BOOKS & THE ARTS.

## Heartless Havens

VICTORIA DE GRAZIA

MOTHERS IN THE FATHERLAND: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics. By Claudia Koonz. St. Martin's. 556 pp. \$25.

A decade or so ago, a young feminist historian began a study of the Nazi women's movement. As she traveled across Germany uncovering caches of documents and gathering testimony from survivors of all kinds, she broadened her scope to include the experience of German women as a whole. The result, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, testifies not just to Claudia Koonz's tenacity and passionate commitment, but to the maturity of a whole generation of feminist scholars. Evocative, often compelling and not a little demagogic, she goes beyond the normal purview of the historian to address political and ethical issues of the most complicated sort: the responsibility of power, the nature of feminist commitment, complicity in the Holocaust and the meaning of Germany's past.

Koonz's argument moves on two quite different levels, historical and ethical. The historical discussion, about how German women fared under the Nazi dictatorship, addresses a perplexing problem: how a regime so obviously anti-feminist garnered widespread support from its female subjects. Here, her main focus is on Nazi women. For it was their definition of German femaleness, placing women back in the home as custodians of culture, race and sentiment, that fleshed out and softened Hitler's sclerotically misogynist ideas enough to allow women to participate in the Nazi movement. With a shortsightedness that would typify female participation in the Third Reich, dozens, then hundreds of women manipulated the desire of thousands of others for a female *Lebensraum* rooted in the private sphere and ruled by women in the interests of the nation, the family and future generations. Their own political mission, at

least initially, fit tidily into the Führer's vision of an expanded nation-state.

A sociologically mixed group including both *lumpen* bourgeois and refined professionals, Nazi women were as devoted to the Führer cult as their male counterparts and drawn to it by similar concerns, in particular, nationalism and fear of the corrupting influence of materialism and modernity. But to work politically, they had to flout conventional female roles. Elsbeth Zander, founder of the "mother cells" of early Nazism and notorious for her spellbinding denunciations of the nefarious plots of "socialists and socialites"; Lydia Gottschewski, scorned by male storm troopers for her dream of a fighting female community; and Pia Sophie Rogge-Börner, famed for her arrogant racist notions of Aryan motherhood—these were truly pioneers of a female politics in a new key. Not surprisingly, they were immediately dumped once the Nazis were enconced in power.

For Nazi men, the ideal administrator of women in the Third Reich probably would have been male. But since women persisted in their demands and the dictatorship needed reliable leaders to mobilize the people, they settled on women who were dexterous in getting male protection, pragmatic enough to puzzle out policy constraints of all sorts and above all sufficiently unflappable to put up with the myriad personal slights and frustrations encountered daily from a regime that saw them essentially as breeders, homebodies, social workers and child educators. Gertrud Scholtz-Klink is the endlessly exasperating anti-heroine of Koonz's account. With the Aryan good looks of an Albert Speer and the unwavering dutifulness of an Adolf Eichmann—neither "amazon nor sneaking hypocrite," as some of her rivals were alleged to be—she embodied the Nazi ideal of womanhood. She had several children, was widowed, then was married again, in 1939, to S.S. General Heissmeyer. Building up a network of several million women in the *Frauenbund*, she was yielding to male pressure while commanding absolute obedience from her female followers. Under her leadership, German women conducted a retreat from manly politics the better to

serve the family and the community. Like Eichmann, Scholtz-Klink had her "good Jews." Like Eichmann, too, she was unrepentant. When Koonz met her in the 1980s, she was still spouting the official cant about motherhood, respectability and family, and quite unable to grasp any notion of individual responsibility, much less express remorse.

Whether all German women shared Scholtz-Klink's commitments is an obvious question, and Koonz is careful to show that Nazi women's claims to represent their gender were in some respects exaggerated and self-serving. Certainly, for working-class women staggering under a double burden, their propagandistic pieties about the comforts of home life were disconcerting. Still, a remarkable number of women rallied quickly and completely to the Nazi system. Catholic women were only a little more hesitant than Protestants; their standoffishness toward Nazism can be traced to Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* and to the conflict between Nazi eugenicist precepts and Catholic doctrine. In the years after Hitler's triumph in 1933, the independent women's groups of all Germany folded before the Nazi state, expelling longstanding and often-honored Jewish members and revising statutes to accord with racist and antifemale doctrines.

The awful paradox here is that the very strength of German women's organizations seems to have facilitated their subordination. Far from being an inchoate, illiterate, unsophisticated mass gullied by displays of priapic power, middle-class women especially were acutely conscious of their rights and interests. Organized by the hundreds of thousands in prosuffrage associations, housewives' groups and reform movements in the Weimar epoch, they actively engaged in what has since been characterized as maternalist or welfare feminism: underscoring the differences between women and men, they demanded that these differences be recognized by legislation and institutions that assisted mothers, honored motherhood and safeguarded the family. Of course, they were not the only groups in German society to be disoriented by the lack of any firm resistance to the Nazi takeover; like many others, even without endorsing Nazism's consoling antimodernism, they rushed pell-mell to defend their own

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interests in its wake. Their fate is a telling lesson in the shortsightedness of interest-group politics.

As it turned out, opportunism was checked by limited opportunity. Even the Nazi women's groups empowered by Hitler to coordinate all women's activity were extremely ineffective advocates for their sex. Partly, this reflected the nature of the dictatorship itself: its much vaunted leadership principle masked a byzantine mess of inefficient bureaucratic satrapies. For women, the problem was compounded by the contradictions in the Nazi conception of women's role. While the evils of women's work

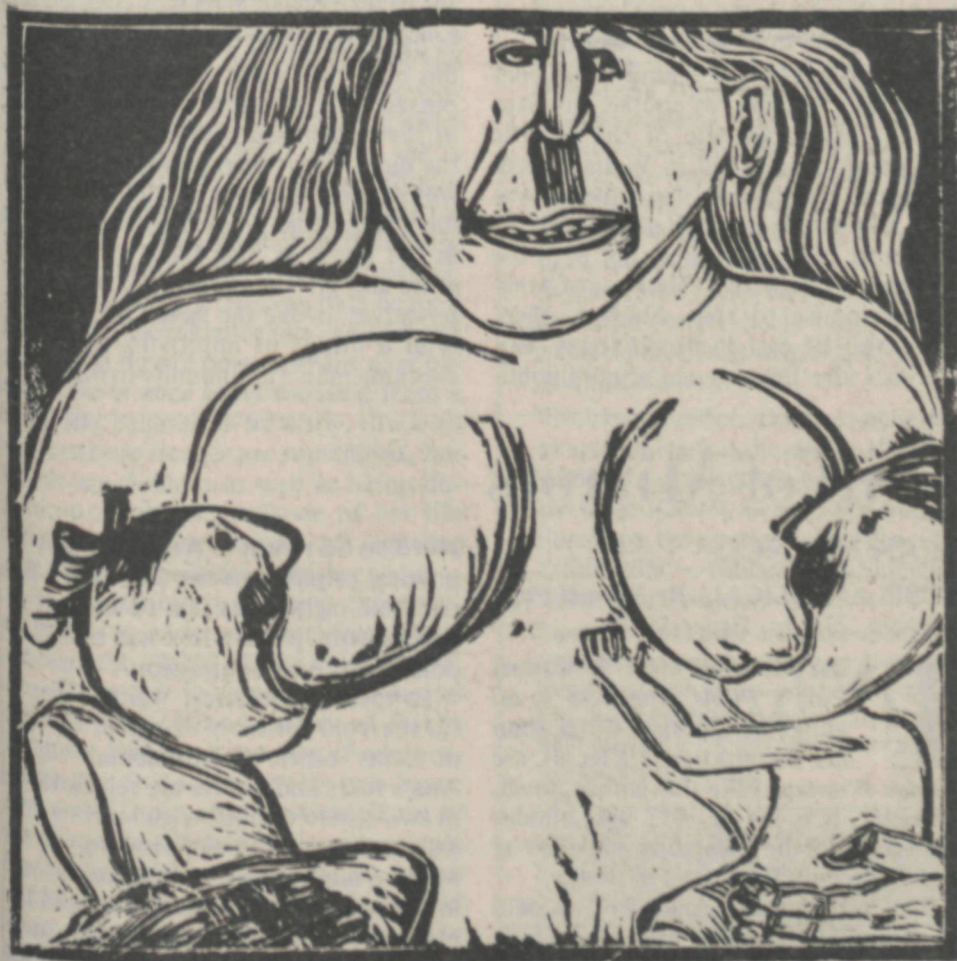
vaded their *Lebensraum* and subverted their goals. Ultimately, the war effort occasioned a eugenic attack against the home front, institutionalizing genocide, breeding schemes and the destruction of community.

When she addresses the broader ethical issues of resistance and the responsibility of German women as a whole, Koonz inevitably moves onto more difficult ground. It is one thing to argue, as she does so convincingly, that the attributes of femaleness manipulated by Nazi women gave the Nazi state a rootedness that the frightful masculinism of bully-boy gangs and the moral indifference of

totalitarian, genocidal and warmongering dictatorship. She thus takes issue with feminist and radical historians who treat antiauthoritarian gestures, violations of rules, even jokes as telltale signs of opposition. Their point is that alternative visions of society can be expressed in more indeterminate ways than the political conspiracy and armed action we normally associate with resistance. To this Koonz replies that in the Third Reich, such gestures were too equivocal to be called opposition. She also takes issue with conservative apologists for Germany's past. Heartened by Reagan's visit to Bitburg, this school of thought maintains that the vast majority of Germans really had nothing to do with Nazi policies. In their revision of history, exemplified by the recent German television epic *Heimat*, the Nazis were just a few rotten apples, and the people harmless provincials making the best of a bad situation. Women are especially important to this image: gossipy, common-sensical and tough, they merely did what women always do, preserving warmth and family life and sustaining the continuity of community.

Koonz is ever mindful that the Nazi state was tolerant of small deviations if one was Aryan and reasonably compliant. Consequently, she demands a more exacting notion of resistance. Like others before her, she has found that resisters, meaning those who were fully conscious of their actions and risked their lives to unmask the regime, were very few indeed. For both women and men, resistance was an existential act, informed by a firm sense of right and wrong, regardless of religious belief, political ideology or gender. There was, Koonz concludes, no specifically female resistance to Nazism.

She does contend, however, that there was a specifically female form of complicity in the Holocaust, and she lays it out as implacably as Hannah Arendt discussing the responsibility of Jewish community leaders in the destruction of European Jewry. It was not merely that women were willfully ignorant of the concentration camps, which many probably were, or that they failed to condemn them, which almost all did. Koonz builds a case for a deeper and more intimate responsibility: that of being the "significant other" of mass murderers. The Nazi system, Koonz argues, aggravated and hideously exploited a historically constructed division of labor that made public men beholden to



outside the home were denounced, a war-mobilized labor market kept women in the workplace. Women were supposed to be closeted away procreating and nurturing; yet at least some were also to be forged into an ideologically prepared elite. To accept the tenets of racial revolution, women were supposed to concur with unconventional notions about child-bearing out of wedlock, forced sterilization and euthanasia, not to mention the overt violence of anti-Semitism. Women had sought a strong state to defend their sphere, only to find that it in-

technocratic elites could never have accomplished alone. But Koonz goes beyond the issue of direct responsibility to indict not only cadres and believers but German women generally for complicity in genocidal policies. "Mothers and wives," she concludes, "made a vital contribution to Nazi power by preserving the illusion of love in an environment of hatred."

Her basic premise here is sound: conventional notions of opposition and innocence are inadequate for dealing with the moral stance of citizens under a



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### BACKGROUND

The show is based on the 5 years a young Dane, Jacob Holdt, hitchhiked over 100,000 miles in the USA. He bought film for his camera by selling blood twice weekly. He lived in more than 400 homes - from the poorest southern sharecroppers, to some of America's wealthiest families (Pabst, Rockefeller). He joined the rebellion in Wounded Knee, followed criminals in the ghettos during muggings, sneaked inside to work in southern slave camps and infiltrated secret Ku Klux Klan meetings. While working with prisoners he saw two of his friends assassinated. By the time he returned to Denmark 12 of his American friends had been murdered.

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The book, which is based on the show, is an international bestseller. The Village Voice revealed that the U.S. State Department grew worried about its impact overseas and commissioned photographers to present the "other side" of America. Written in a personal tone it is now a popular classroom supplement in American schools. 800 photos, the bulk in color.

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duty and private women the custodians of sentiment. Orders from above shaped a workaday reality of murder; the intimacy of family life relieved inner doubts. Concentration camp guards consoled themselves with thoughts of their loved ones, and S.S. troops found solace on home leave from killing duty on the Eastern Front. Meanwhile, women eschewed public responsibility, and on the grounds of fealty to family life and future generations, sheltered their kin from knowledge and nurtured a false sense of decency in men responsible for genocide. After Auschwitz, there is no poetry, said Adorno; after the camps, Koonz seems to say, there is no more "haven in a heartless world."

This conclusion is bound to be controversial. Adorno, of course, saw Auschwitz as emblematic of the horrific inhumanity embedded in Western technological civilization. The violence was such that its origins could not be laid to a particular political regime, not even the most vilely totalitarian. The issue of women's response to that violence, then, must also be cast in broad terms. But Koonz's idea that women acquire politi-

cal responsibilities by loving leads to odd positions indeed. If this logic were pursued, we would have to indict the wives and mothers of the American fliers who bombed Hiroshima or American women whose husbands and sons committed atrocities in Vietnam. While Koonz has resisted the essentialist trap of cultural feminism that makes women especially morally virtuous, she succumbs to another kind of exceptionalism that makes the Holocaust historically unique and subjects anybody connected with it to special moral imperatives.

Koonz's most persuasive arguments are served by her compelling evidence about the political involvement of women in the Third Reich. Nobody, having read this book, will want to argue that women possess special moral virtues. *Mothers in the Fatherland* cautions us to be all the more wary when politicians deplore women's involvement in public power on the ground that women should be back in the home as guardians of civilizing grace and private morality, or when conservatives invoke the haven of the family as a means of improving society or checking man's inhumanity to man. □

## Hall of Mirrors

JEAN FRANCO

**PUBIS ANGELICAL.** By Manuel Puig. Vintage. 236 pp. Paper \$6.95.

First published in 1979, Manuel Puig's *Pubis Angelical* is an altogether bleaker novel than his better-known *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Like this earlier novel, however, it is set in 1975 and alludes indirectly to the escalating violence of Isabel Perón's final days in power.

The protagonist, Ana, who is said to resemble the 1930s film star Hedy Lamarr, is in a hospital in Mexico waiting for the results of a biopsy. She has left Argentina to escape the attentions of a powerful and threatening admirer, Alejandro, only to find herself imprisoned in her hospital bed with no contacts except Beatriz, a casual friend, and Juan José Pozzi, an ex-lover and political activist. Pozzi wants her help in a plan to kidnap Alejandro in order to raise money for his political party. Ana's fear of death, her remorse when Pozzi is

killed on his return to Argentina and her physical helplessness are transposed into paranoid nightmares that obsessively revolve around plots of love and treachery, domination and submission.

In these nightmares, which seem to fill the void formerly occupied by God or some other transcendental vision, Ana's fears and desires are reincarnated in two sister/victims: a glamorous film star of the 1930s, referred to as the Mistress and the "most beautiful woman in the world," and W218, a woman living in the artificial landscape of futuristic science fiction. Both of them share Ana's obsessions: the attraction she feels for wealth and luxury, her desire for an ideal lover, her fear of betrayal, her need for male regard to affirm her identity, her rejection of other women—even her own daughter and mother—her suspicion of male motives. Women like Ana, Puig suggests, offer themselves as objects of adoration only to find themselves trapped in narcissism and paranoia. Not for nothing does he make the origin of this subjectivity parallel the origin of the movie industry, depicting the female imagination as a huge movie

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