Class Struggle around the Hearth: Women and Domestic Service in the Weimar Republic

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One aspect of fascism that has continued to puzzle historians is its relationship to women. Though fewer women than men voted for Hitler, the question remains of what drew some women into protofascist and fascist political groups, when these appeared to be so overtly misogynist. One possible answer may be the deterioration of women's material condition during the Weimar Republic despite some constitutional gains. This contradiction sponsored reactionary impulses, particularly among the middle class.¹ This chapter pursues that hypothesis through a study of the actions and ideology of a particular group, chosen because it represents a significant portion of the middle class: the organization of urban housewives. More importantly, their fight against organized domestic servants will be traced as a particular aspect of the class struggle of this period: the conflict over which women, that is, the women of which class, would do the work of social reproduction of the bourgeoisie. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to consider the various schemes for the socialized reproduction of all classes. Rather, I argue that the actual historical conflict over service was part of the overall class struggle and of the crisis of capitalism that debilitated the petit bourgeoisie and may have led to National Socialism.

The Housewives Union was one of the largest groups inside the Federation of German Women's Associations and, just by being there, pushed the umbrella group rightward in the political spectrum.² Since the ideology of the Housewives Union was traditional, holding that woman's place was primarily in the home, its claim to the label "feminist" is doubtful. However, a summary overview of the history of the German women's movement indicates that, in context, the claim is not entirely misplaced.³

From its beginnings in the revolutions of 1848 to the start of
World War I, German feminism was weakened by division and diluted by conservatism. It was divided mainly between bourgeois and socialist feminists, despite occasional attempts at alliance. The bourgeois wing was conservative, partly because of legal intimidation and partly because the German idea of feminism, like "the German idea of freedom," suffered from the dependence of and constraints on the middle class that believed in it. The socialist wing, operating from within an originally revolutionary movement, also differed from and opposed the bourgeois individualism of Anglo-American feminism, though for different reasons. Thus, German feminism as a whole rarely surmounted the notion of women's duties on behalf of women's rights. At best, it argued for women's rights in order to better pursue those duties. Only a small proportion of the women's movement mobilized around suffrage.

After the quasi-revolution of 1918 and during the ensuing smoldering civil war endemic to the Weimar Republic, the bourgeois and socialist women's movements became increasingly and overtly antagonistic. The socialist women's movement split into two major groups: those following the majority Social Democratic party and those following its former women's leader, Clara Zetkin, into the newly formed Communist party. The bourgeois women's movement continued its prewar trend toward increasing conservatism and the Federation of German Women's Associations became almost paralyzed as a unified political pressure group. Considerable activity thus devolved upon its component interest groups, of whom the Housewives Union was the largest. Hardly feminist at the start, it came to employ the rhetoric of women's rights to defend its particular interest, broadly construed as "housewifery," and used the German idea of feminism to put gender politics into the service of class politics. Its practical methods, borrowed from active feminists, and the dissemination of its ideology became an important ingredient of the Nazi solution to "the woman question."

The Housewives Union defined itself as a professional organization, originating in several local housewives' associations of the Wilhelmine Empire. These had formed around several issues, not the least of which was the collective mobilization against newly forming unions of domestic servants, most of them under socialist auspices. World War I enlarged the housewives' goals and led to centralization. On May 22, 1915, in a kind of feminist Burgfrieden, a disparate assortment of women gathered in the Lyceum Club in Berlin to create the Housewives Union. Hedwig Heyl, daughter of the founder of North German Lloyd and herself a founder of the oldest Berlin home economics courses dating back to 1835, became honorary head of the new group, but its first president was Martha Voss-Zletz, a suffragist and representative of the Federation of German Women's Associations, which seems to have taken the initiative for the centralization. Also present were Dr. Agnes von Zahn-Harnack, one of the first
historians of the German women's movement and last president of
the Federation, as well as Anna Blos, future Reichstag delegate
for the Social Democratic party. In the next two years, the
Housewives Union also attracted leaders of the separately
organized Rural Housewives Associations, including aristocrats
such as Countess Schwerin-Lüwitz and Countess Margarete von
Keyserlingk, representing agricultural producer interests
whose presence brought an attack from the press and forced the
Housewives Union to leave the War Commission for Consumer
Interests. Fourteen associations entered the Housewives Union
at its founding and fifty-one more joined in the first year, for
a total of about forty-five thousand members.

What brought them all together at this time was, of course, the
national emergency. They saw their tasks to be advising
housewives on wartime consumer problems, improving the transport-
and distribution of foods, influencing the price structure,
and "solving" the servant problem. The latter broke open with
the end of the general Burgfrieden in 1917, when the Central Union
of Domestic Employees petitioned the Reichstag to lift the semi-
feudal regulations, the Gesindeordnungen, which determined their
work conditions, and demanded to be included instead in the
Industrial Code applying to other workers. That action marked
the resumption of an old struggle, around which domestic servants
had first organized in Nürnberg in 1906, led by the socialist
Helene Grünberg, and which was to persist throughout the Weimar
Republic. At issue was the legal status of household employment
relations, a protracted conflict conducted mainly by women, in
which the Housewives Union represented the bourgeois household,
an imperfectly commoditized sphere of class reproduction,
characterized by patriarchal relations, and defended it and
themselves from encroaching capitalist relations.

Before 1913, fifty-nine regulations that varied from region to
region determined the rights and obligations of household help,
called Gesinde. Since the thirteenth century, Gesinde law had
developed as a service contract between free persons, in which
one party promised service and the other promised provision for
a limited period. Socially, however, servants were subordinate
for that amount of time to the head of a household, who was
also their legal guardian. With the development of central
state institutions, the legal conditions of Gesinde worsened,
especially in eastern Germany, where they were commonly employed
as agricultural laborers on large estates. Stein's 1810 edicts,
eliminating serfdom in Prussia, led to recodification of other
dependency relations there, and other German states followed
the model. Exception laws were drafted, however, extending work
obligation indefinitely and allowing the withholding of wages,
as well as physical punishment and police coercion of recalcitrant
servants. Virtual serfdom re-entered through the kitchen
doors.

The Civil Code of 1896 did little to alleviate the conditions of
Gesinde, leaving their specific regulation to individual states, historically the worst offenders. The Civil Code did make some aspects of its general codification of service contracts applicable to Gesinde, such as prohibition of physical punishment; mandatory wage payment (though it might be in kind rather than in cash); the right to prime creditor status in case of the employer’s bankruptcy; the right to room and board and to reasonable, but unspecified, rest periods; protection against the garnishee of wages for property damage; care in case of illness for up to six weeks, to be paid by the now obligatory sickness insurance. However, these mitigations, impressive on paper, were virtually nullified by the still effective Prussian Gesinde law of 1310, which drastically, and with police enforcement, limited servants’ rights to terminate their contracts. Thus, when the Council of People’s Representatives decreed an end to all Gesinde laws on November 12, 1918, and on January 24, 1919, issued a temporary decree putting agricultural labor under the Industrial Code, private household service alone remained unregulated. Here organized housewives, acting as legal deputies of the male heads of households, fought organized domestics in a specifically female arena of class struggle.

WOMAN’S WORK IS NEVER DONE: THE PROBLEM OF REGULATING DOMESTIC SERVICE

From the start, the opponents were unevenly matched. In 1919, the Central Union of Domestic Employees claimed about thirty-one thousand members, a figure it never reached again, while the Housewives Union peaked at two hundred and fifty thousand members in 1922. In addition to numbers, the Housewives Union had far more resources at its command: money for travel to conferences, publicity, and social connections to facilitate their political work. Not originally feminist, the Housewives Union nevertheless soon was manipulating newly accessible levers of power, such as the right to elect and be elected to public office, to serve as judges on labor courts, to lobby, and so on. They used access to the media to project their definition of woman’s contribution to national life as one of unending service and sacrifice, regardless of class, pointing out that today’s servants were tomorrow’s working-class wives. Paradoxically, while the Central Union of Domestic Employees rarely used the language of gender, their attempts to limit household work to certain hours, rather than have it absorb all available time, was potentially much more feminist. The confessional unions of domestics tended to parrot their mistresses in this regard.

Long stretches of “work-readiness” (Arbeitsbereitschaft) versus a shorter and well-defined actual working period was the major item of contention between the housewives and the domestics and was also the key to distinguishing precapitalist notions of service, in which the servant rented out (literally for Mietgeld) his or her person, from capitalist relations of labor, in which
the worker contracted to give a specified amount of labor power. The old regional Gesinde laws and even the more enlightened national Civil Code did not specify any number of hours of work or rest due domestic workers. Naturally, that became the first item on the agenda when the revolutionary Council's decree made it negotiable. For domestics, change was crucial. A 1917 survey showed that about half of them served sixteen hours a day.27

At first, in the absence of formal legislation, "model" contracts were drawn up between local organizations of domestics and housewives, analogous to the parity agreements between workers and employers in the industrial sector. The parameters of negotiation were immediately apparent. On February 12, 1919, the Hagedenburg local of the Central Union of Domestic Employees negotiated a contract with the local Housewives Union for a ten-hour workday for urban domestics and, for rural domestics, nine to eleven hours, depending on the season.28 "Red Bavaria" even promulgated a state law fixing domestic service at ten hours.29 By contrast, the Berlin city employment agency issued a model contract for thirteen hours of "work-readiness," inclusive of two interruptable hours for meals and rest.30 A similar one from Cassel, reflecting a local agreement, petitioned the Labor Ministry for legal status.31 Between these two poles, the ultimately unresolved debate continued throughout the Weimar period.

Twice, in 1921 and 1927, the government drafted legislation to regulate household service. Hopes for its passage were highest the first time around, and considerable energy went into the discussion of details. It got the most exhaustive consideration in the Temporary National Economic Council, the politically tamed successor to the revolutionary councils and supposedly a forerunner to a permanent economic parliament, never actually established, to parallel the political parliament. Modelled on the parity councils of employers and workers that emerged from the original revolutionary councils, the economic parliament added a third group of "consumers," who tended to split their votes between the two major contenders. This temporary institution lacked even effective advisory power, but its records bear witness to the heat of many battles and offer invaluable details of them. Here, in the Social Policy Committee, Luise Kühler, representing the Central Union of Domestic Employees, fought steadfastly for a ten-hour day, while Charlotte Mühlen-Werther, an "expert witness" to the Committee, though not a formal member, represented the Housewives Union and was equally adamant about thirteen hours of "work-readiness."32 Elisabeth Vurthmann, representing the National Union of Female Domestic Employees of Germany, the Christian organization, kept a low profile and rarely engaged in debate.

The argument for ten hours, rather than eight as established by the new Industrial Code, included one concession, namely that
domestic service differed from industrial work in not being continuous labor and that two hours might therefore be added as buffer. The argument for thirteen hours, potentially expandable to even more, came from the interpretation of household work as limitless by definition because it was geared to family needs. Domestic service, it was said, was fine training for a working-class marriage. 

But even before the debate over hours took place, the opponents engaged over the very definition of a domestic employee. The first paragraph of the government draft distinguished between two categories, "household assistant" (Hausgehilfin) who was in residence, and "household worker" (Haushaltsarbeiter) who was not, dropping altogether the derogatory term "servant" (Dienstmädchen and Dienstbote). The distinction mattered for the domestics, who, if they were not residents, might share in the somewhat better conditions already achieved by nonresidents, free of the Gesinde law in the first place. But the distinction also mattered to the housewives, who wanted nonresidents included in the legislation, since residential service was declining sharply.

There were several reasons for this trend. In the main, domestic service shrank as the industrial production of consumer goods narrowed household chores primarily to maintenance. The same process of industrialization and urbanization also gradually dried up the rural source of domestic labor, though household service still retained some of its historical function as a bridge for young country women coming into the city. A historically more specific reason for the decline in residential service in Germany was the impoverishment of parts of the middle class, who sometimes preferred to rent out the maid's room and save on the expense of caring for her as the Civil Code required. Another was the increasing unwillingness of potential servants to live under onerous and degrading conditions with little personal freedom, when other options were open to them. In periods of high unemployment, with fewer choices, women might enter, but also soon leave domestic service, creating the paradoxical impression of both a servant shortage and a large pool of potential domestics whose very existence hampered effective collective bargaining. So embattled was the question of definition, that the Committee deferred voting on it, pending discussion of other parts of the draft legislation.

The prolonged debate was over hours of work. Here the government draft proposed thirteen hours of "work-readiness," with designated Sundays off and other leisure time. Wähler moved to amend to ten hours for adults and eight for minors under eighteen. Mhsam supported the government draft, arguing that many housewives now also worked and needed more help in the house. A spokesman for the workers' side pointed out broader ramifications: In commerce and transport, the term "work-readiness" was being used to prevent fixing hours; it was an assault on labor in general. The Labor Ministry's representative defended the government draft
on the grounds that fixing hours for domestic labor would destroy the middle-class family, mainstay of German spiritual life. But feisty Luise Kühler retorted earthily that many housewives were already fixing hours for their servants to use the toilet. So much for spirituality. Still, she lost her amendment by eleven to ten votes.43

The issue of hours remained embedded, however, in the definition of who was to be covered by this law, the vote on which had been deferred. So when it was raised again at the end of the first reading of the entire law, Kühler pleaded fervently to have nonresidents excluded, on the ground that no one should expect thirteen hours of work from a person who also had to travel to and from the workplace. Again she lost, fourteen to nine.41 Still, she would not give up. On second reading of the bill, she argued that household workers, like laundresses and cleaning women, did exhausting work and should not be expected to do it longer than the eight hours, to which their current legal status entitled them. Again, her motion was first deferred and then defeated.42 On the major issues, then, of who was to be covered and how long they were to work, the housewives and their allies on the Committee won.

But the other issues of contention in this bill give an even clearer indication of the level of struggle and its bitterness. In seven months of debate, long hours and many speeches went into justifying or denying demands for space and furniture specifications for resident domestics and their access to a heated room during rest periods; whether the meals to which they were entitled need only be healthy and sufficient or also of comparable quality to the employer's; the extent of sick care to be expected, including at childbirth; the inviolability of night rest and vacation time; the proportion of wages that might be garnished for property damage; conditions for and notice of termination; and finally, special identification of employees with photographs, a reminder of the prerevolutionary work record (Dienstbuch) that had singled out servants from all other workers and was considered a humiliation by them. The score on all these other points, when the Committee had finished its deliberations, favored the domestics. But when the bill came to a final vote on May 4, 1922, the dissatisfaction of all parties was registered in its defeat: Employers opposed it, the Catholic Union of Domestics supported it, and the Central Union of Domestic Employees abstained, Kühler saying that ultimately she couldn't support a bill for thirteen hours.43

Still, the bill was forwarded to plenary session of the Temporary National Economic Council, where it had three more readings, in which Kühler and her allies tried again to restore the original government draft defining the category to be covered. Here, too, they failed. Worse still, at the very last reading of October 13, 1922, the employers' group won back some earlier concessions and
gained even more in hours. Night rest was reduced from eleven to nine hours, leaving fifteen hours of "work-readiness," sick care was curtailed, vacations shortened, reasons for dismissal without notice extended, and the hated photo identification, symbol of servitude, was restored. Now the employers' group was ready to support the bill; it passed by 103 to 97 votes. Disgusted, Thöle walked out. 44

Organized domestics now put their hopes in the political legislature, where the bill was next headed, hoping worker interests would be better represented there than in the economic quasi-parliament with its parity structures in which worker interests could command only one-third of the votes. But it never got there. On December 22, 1922, the Reichsrat tabled it and it never reached the Reichstag. The reason given was the pressing economic crisis. 45

Five years later, a second attempt to legislate for household service met the same fate. A modified version of the first bill was sent to the Reichstag at the end of 1927, but remained in committee until June 1939, when the Reichstag itself was dissolved. Debate around the second bill was even more vituperous and politicized than around the first. The Hamburg local of the Housewives Union, headed by Martha Voss-Zietz, one of the founders and now a member of the Fatherland Party, protested the bill at a plenary of the Temporary National Economic Council on September 19, 1928. She argued that state regulation would interfere unduly in the private household and would materially damage both the middle class and the servants it would consequently disemploy. Cosigners of the protest were the Stahlhelm Frauenbund of Greater Berlin, the National League of Large Families (Reichsbund der Kinderreichen), the Deutscher Frauenkampfbund, and the National Association of Employed Housewives (Reichsvereinigung gewerbetreibender Hausfrauen). 46

Concretely, the Housewives Union was disappointed that the modified bill had dropped the photo identification, limited garnishee of wages for damages to only half a month's pay, and had assured some Sundays and vacations for domestics—especially troublesome to large families. In a strange distortion of a feminist argument, they opposed the protection of young domestics from employment by persons previously convicted on a morals charge, asserting that housewives, not husbands, should be considered the actual employers. However, after more revisions, they were relatively satisfied that there would be no household inspections of work conditions, that employee references were mandatory (though not detailed enough), and, most importantly, that only nine hours of rest for adults and ten for minors were mandated, leaving fourteen to fifteen hours of "work-readiness," inclusive of meals and rest periods. Overall, they voiced appreciation for the attempt to restore family-servant relations of old, and they regretted the bill's ultimate demise. 47
By contrast, the Central Union of Domestic Employees, having repeatedly pressed for the first bill's revival with the support of the Social Democratic party in the Reichstag, applauded the appearance of a new bill, still hoping for improved conditions. A questionnaire polling over four thousand domestics showed that nearly half had only ten hours of night rest, nearly a third had only nine hours, and most had very few days off, including Sundays. The union soon observed that the new bill would give little, if any, relief. While it was being discussed, a sympathetic analyst compared its provisions to the status quo pertaining under prescriptions of the Civil Code. On the positive side, he noted gains such as some legal determination of work hours, some guarantee of rights usable in law, protection against dismissal without notice, and some vacation allowance. On the negative side, he counted losses such as the infamous photo identification (ultimately dropped), fines for damages, sick care chargeable against the employee's earnings, and unclarity about reasons for dismissal. The worst—increase in work hours to fifteen—was yet to come. Small wonder the bill's demise was unmourned by the domestics. If they had wished for regulation and the housewives had not, in the end the latter would have felt better served than the former, had the bill passed.

OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES: HOUSEHOLD APPRENTICESHIP

The struggle sharpened further after the first bill had failed. Runaway inflation in 1923 severely damaged working-class organizations and eroded the thin line separating already precarious parts of the middle class from the working class. Not only did middle-class daughters find themselves rubbing elbows with working-class daughters in the new women's professions, sales and clerical work, but the unwelcome leveling also occurred in the home. For middle-class households, the thin line of social respectability was represented by now barely affordable servants, a situation which worsened in the Great Depression. For middle-class housewives, ever more was at stake: the work itself. Modern technology offered some help—the pages of Die Deutsche Hausfrau, organ of the Housewives Union, were liberally sprinkled with advertisements for modern appliances—but it also foretold an unwelcome future: Housewives were about to replace their servants with themselves. In Marxist terms, the work of social reproduction of the middle class, hitherto assisted by members of the working class and peasantry, was falling more directly onto the women of this middle class, at least of its lower strata, threatening to "proletarianize" them.

Desperate, the Housewives Union became creative. It developed the idea of a household year for all girls, with the quasi-feminist rationale that housewifery was a profession like other professions, requiring skill, training and an apprenticeship. The latter, not coincidentally, would enormously widen the pool from which
household help could be drawn. The idea was not altogether new. In Stuart England, young paupers were frequently hired as "apprentices to housewifery" for only room and board. \(^{53}\) In Germany, it appears to have originated in the 1390s with Ida von Koritzfleisch, a rural pioneer for home economics. In 1912, organized Catholic women called for universal compulsory preparation for women's domestic calling. \(^{54}\) But it was the war that finally swung the balance of the German women's movement into supporting a National Service Year for women, complementing the male draft, though it was neither compulsory nor confined to domestic labor. Rather, under the leadership of the Federation of German Women's Associations, working closely with government, the National Service Year became a major home front auxiliary, providing social services for soldiers' families and coordinating women's employment with war needs. \(^{35}\)

But there was a revolution simmering inside the German household. When the demobilization office advised the Labor Ministry in January 1918 that it had "a lively interest" in the demobilization of women from defense industry to domestic labor and wished to be consulted in any determinations of work conditions, the Labor Ministry forwarded the letter in May to three major housewives' organizations, but not to the domestics' unions. It asked them for materials on the urban and rural servant situation, employers' needs, servants' potential demands, and how far housewives would be willing to meet those demands. \(^{56}\) Before the response was in, a revolution had occurred--or so it seemed. The "servant question" was suddenly altered by the abolition of the Gesinde laws and requests for guidelines started pouring in to the Labor Ministry. \(^{57}\) A long-range solution was proposed by Anna Blos, a founder of the Housewives Union and a future Social Democratic Reichstag deputy. She advocated half a year's additional compulsory schooling in home economics for all female elementary school graduates, costs to be covered by the state and communities. \(^{58}\) This was in keeping with the viewpoint of the Central Union of Domestic Employees, who saw schooling as a way of upgrading their profession. Meanwhile, women unionists pointed out that qualifications alone would not guarantee good jobs and reminded domestics to organize also. \(^{59}\)

By June 1919, the political tide was turning. The Association for the Development of Home Economics, a predecessor of the Housewives Union and one of the groups queried by the Labor Ministry over a year earlier, had its solution ready, It, too, advocated schooling, but supplemented that with a practicum to be carried out in an actual household. It appended a model apprentice contract. \(^{60}\) Domestics immediately recognized the "practicum" as a form of cheap labor, exploiting youth and endangering adult employment. When the Central Union of Domestic Employees held its tenth anniversary meeting on September 21-25, 1919, in Berlin, still hopeful about negotiating a better future, it warned against the signing of apprentice contracts. \(^{61}\)
Meanwhile, the Housewives Union thought of a still cheaper and more controllable labor source: an exchange of daughters (Hausstüchter) among themselves. This notion, harking back to medieval apprenticeships, gave rise to some perplexing questions, of which the most interesting regarded payment. In 1925, Die Deutsche Hausfrau asked its readers to suggest answers as to whether a girl's parents should pay for her training, or whether the household apprenticing her should pay her an allowance like a daughter, or whether she should simply get room and board in exchange for her "education." The answers were cool-headed: She might get a little pocket money if she were over seventeen and had some special skill; she should simply get room and board if freshly out of school but willing to commit herself for at least one year; and she might pay up to one hundred marks a month for specialized education including "social improvement." The exchange of daughters seems to have offered hope for upward mobility and possibly marriage through apprenticeship to "higher circles"—for a price. But this feudally inspired idea did not take hold in the crisis-ridden 1920s, as Luise Klöhler, wise in the ways of domestic service, predicted. Not only did the young ladies complain, but they also failed to meet the work expectations of their mistresses. The experiment was soon dropped.

However, apprenticeship of girls from the working class not only took hold, but became predominant. By 1921, it had spread alarmingly, helped by the fact that welfare relief legally could supplement apprentice wages. The terms were often brutal. A "model" apprentice contract proposed from Königsberg in Prussia for fourteen-year-old girls just out of school included thirteen-and-a-half hours of work, with half-hour breaks for meals, every other Sunday off, and ten marks a month in wages for the first year. Defiance was expected: A girl could be dismissed for repeated disobedience, for tending to immorality, which included lying or nibbling between meals (naschen), or for speaking ill of the household. She could terminate the contract, but in that case her family had to pay compensation. It was all dangerously close to the old Gesinde laws, despite some improvements, such as vacation and social insurance.

By 1922, the economic crisis had developed to such a degree that regular domestics' wages were cut in half, making the stalled legislation moot, in any case, and making the apprentice year "popular." It became a revolving door for household help drawn from a generationally inexhaustible supply. The Central Union bowed to the inevitable and began trying to improve rather than fight apprenticeship. On December 17, 1924, the Prussian Trade Ministry gave legal recognition to an apprentice contract between the Housewives Union and various domestics' unions that allowed twelve-and-a-half hours of work for those over seventeen and only eight for younger girls. But in the later recession of 1927, the Housewives Union negotiated to have the latter group...
also work twelve hours. Actual conditions were even harsher. A 1930 questionnaire distributed among approximately three hundred students between the ages of fourteen and seventeen in a three-year vocational school for domestics showed that over half worked between thirteen and sixteen hours a day with nonresidents better off at closer to eleven hours. Nearly half the resident domestics slept in attics, one-third of which were unheated. Small wonder that nearly half the students responding admitted to having changed jobs more than once.

Meanwhile, the Housewives Union stepped up its campaign to elevate housewifery by elaborating on home economics training, complete with theoretical and practical preparation and degrees—all the criteria for professionalization, including tracking by social class. The goal was not merely to raise the status of housewifery, though that provided the major rationale; the goal was also to control the "profession," lest the unions control it. But economic crisis weakened the latter in any case, without particularly improving the servant shortage, since needy women often chose public assistance over the notoriously onerous and humiliating domestic service. The housewives' main purpose, then, was still to enlarge the pool of domestic help by enforcing home economics training and apprenticeship for the majority of women.

At the tenth anniversary of the Housewives Union in 1925, its second president, Anna Gerhardt, spoke in the auditorium of Breslau University on the organization's present and future work. Beginning with a historical overview, she noted that housewives had learned the value of collective work through their war effort and that their movement owed a debt to the women's movement for bringing them together. The first professional women who had banded together had allowed housewives, whom they helped to organize, to see themselves as professionals also. Gerhardt adapted the notion of Beruf to women's role in the home, drawing on cultural-religious meanings of the word "calling:" an inner voice for a holy mission, demanding renunciation, self-sacrifice, discipline, education, and, above all, service. Without these, the indispensable energies of maternalism, Germany could not recover. While stressing the spiritual, Gerhardt nevertheless acknowledged the material value of household labor. The labor of housewives, she said, while often coerced and exploited, is not to be translated into "vile payment" (schnöde Bezahlung), but should be recognized as a contribution to the national well being. She then outlined the plan: first, a full year of home economics in the now compulsory vocational schools (Berufsschulen) (but not the Gymnasium, attended by the daughters of the well-to-do); then, apprenticeship in a household, followed by an examination qualifying poor girls "from all social groups and educational backgrounds" for a newly elevated legally recognized profession of "household caretaker" (Haushaltspflegerin). This profession
could be exercised not only in private homes, but also in institutions, an area of jurisdiction that had been hotly contested by unionized public service workers in 1919.\textsuperscript{70}

The plan was elaborated further in later years. Professional women organized in confessional associations feared that home economics training, which they did not oppose in principle, would cut into time needed for other vocational training. Hence, they requested the Reichstag in 1926 to rule that attendance in vocational schools be lengthened from three to four years, that household apprenticeship immediately follow elementary school and not be counted toward secondary school, and that secondary-school home economics classes not mix regular students with those planning to become domestics.\textsuperscript{71} Meanwhile, the Housewives Union tried to get state grants-in-aid for apprentices, a bald request for public monies to support private services, with the justification that the training of future working-class wives and mothers was for the national good.\textsuperscript{72} Class conscious and more feminist, Die Gewerkschaftliche Frauenzeitung, organ of the women unionists in the general German labor federation, asserted that not every woman aimed to become a housewife and that the state should not be expected to train servants for big estates, whose owners didn't even pay their full share of taxes.\textsuperscript{73}

Still, the Housewives Union generated further plans. It developed a hierarchy of training for two socially distinct groups of new professionals. "Simple, but excellently prepared personnel" for private households could move from domestic assistant (Hausgehilfin) to household caretaker (Haushaltspflegerin) and beyond that to licensed housekeeper (Wirtschafterin), the last also being open to experienced housewives. The other group moved toward degrees of Master (Meister) and Home Manager (Wirtschaftsmeisterin), which led to higher managerial status. These required some secondary education, an additional year and a half of school, and a minimum age of twenty-four on taking the examination, all of which effectively took these degrees out of the reach of most proletarian families. By 1930, the Housewives Union could report 296 graduates with Masters in 26 cities.\textsuperscript{74}

The Central Union of Domestic Employees, defeated in its legislative hopes and having had to capitulate to the apprenticing system, was reduced to aiming for representation on the examination committees and to securing promotion to the higher titles.\textsuperscript{75}

And the worst was yet to come.

The Great Depression made household help cheap again. In Breslau, the local Housewives Union organized "training workshops" for girls who, on pain of losing their unemployment or welfare checks, had to sew six hours a day for thirty-six days, mending their own clothes one-third of the time and second-hand clothes for welfare recipients two-thirds of the time. Munich had a similar system.\textsuperscript{76} "Workfare" had arrived. Furthermore, disappointed that Brüning's emergency decree lowering wages did
not include the category of domestics, the Housewives Union began urging reduction of social taxes on domestics' paychecks, which, though nominally shared by employer and employee, were actually sent in by employers after negotiating a "net" wage with employees. This was done in 1933. Jubilantly, Die Deutsche Hausfrau proclaimed: "Nothing is impossible in the new Germany!"

The labor market continued shifting in their favor. With unemployment soaring and relief measures cut, women again became willing to serve, even as resident domestics, for room and board and no wages at all. Haustöchteren were again exchanged, drawn from the ailing sections of the middle class, but were now expected to offer more: languages, musical skills, even a driver's license, for the privilege of residing with a "better" family.

While the women unionists' newspaper ran increasingly alarming headlines about the National Socialist party, the housewives' journal remained steadfastly "unpolitical," even letting Hitler's accession to the chancellorship in January 1933 go unremarked. But the May issue celebrated Labor Day with a paean of praise to German reconstruction and published the notorious blueprint by Magda Goebbels for the sexual division of labor in the new German state. It had three parts:

1. Work which women must undertake, such as welfare, teaching, and other nurturant activities, specified by women's nature.

2. Work which women may undertake, such as factory and office work and certain kinds of professions such as pediatrics, laboratory assistance, and other careers not alien to women's temperament.

3. Work which men alone should do, such as defense, law, and politics, which required a cold, clear objectivity alien to women's warm and sensitive nature.

In June, Maria Jecker, third and last president of the Housewives Union under the Weimar Republic, brought her organization into the German Women's Front. Expressing gratitude for Hitler's interest in a domestic service year—"No earlier regimes listened to us," she said—Jecker presented a modified plan, dropping formal schooling, now acknowledged to be too costly to the state, and substituting the parental home as a place of training. By August, the Housewives Union stood corrected in its "narrow" definition of women's service to the National Socialist state. The domestic service year was to become a general service year (Dienstjahr), within which household service was merely one option of several. Gleichschaltung had arrived for the Housewives Union.

Still, it had won important material and ideological gains. By
1933, there were 160,000 more domestics working in private homes than there had been in 1933. And the Nazi regime sponsored as its own the Union's view of women's place, for which they had well prepared the German public. In most ways, they stood confirmed.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the official Nazi program for "the woman question"—though pragmatically manipulated later to suit war needs—was not drawn out of an ideological hat alone, nor was it built solely on national nostalgia for lost "havens in a heartless world," but rested firmly on a long-standing public effort by an organized interest group in the conservative wing of the women's movement. The Housewives Union was dedicated not only to enhancing the status of housewifery, in an adaptation of German feminism, but to securing a steady supply of cheap household service. Their goal was not merely ideological; it had a material base.

Due to the historical feminization of household service, it was women who fought out this particular battle in one of the last strongholds of patriarchy against capitalist social relations. The reactionary Housewives Union, by using gender rhetoric for its class interests, helped to prepare for fascism in Germany and felt itself confirmed by Nazi ideology.

Some women, by virtue of their class interests, contributed to the rise and temporary success of fascism in Germany by using the bourgeois feminism of their day as an ideological tool. The notion of woman's unique mission and nature was easily co-opted and ultimately absorbed by the Nazi state, which muted class struggle, around the hearth as elsewhere, with force.
NOTES

I would like to thank the following people, whose thoughtful suggestions strengthened and clarified this article: Bonnie Anderson, Atina Grossmann, Amy Hackett, Deborah Hertz, Marion Kaplan, Claudia Koonz, Molly Nolan, and Hobart A. Spalding, Jr. A grant from the Professional Staff Congress—City University of New York Research Award Program made the German archives accessible to me, and the courteous and efficient staff of the Central State Archives in Potsdam, German Democratic Republic, made it possible for me to maximize my time there.


4 Richard J. Evans, "Bourgeois Feminists and Women Socialists in
Germany 1894-1914: Lost Opportunity or Inevitable Conflict?" 
Women's Studies International Quarterly, 1980, vol. 3, 
pp. 355-76.

A Prussian law prevented women's political association from 
1350 to 1903, and a nationwide law made political activities 
of the Social Democratic party illegal from 1873 to 1890.

Leonard Krieger, The German Idea of Freedom (Boston: 
Beacon, 1757).


Amy Hackett, "The German Women's Movement and Suffrage, 
1390-1914: A Study of National Feminism," Modern European 
Social History, edited by Robert J. Bezucha, (Lexington, 

Hackett, "The Politics of Feminism," chapter 3; and Evans, 
The Feminist Movement in Germany, pp. 235-53.

The Deutsche Verband der Hausfrauen, founded in 1915, became 
the Reichsverband Deutscher Hausfrauenvereine (RDH) in 1924. 
The main archive of the national organization is in the Central 
State Archive at Potsdam, but is still uncatalogued and 
therefore inaccessible to researchers. This chapter relies 
on pertinent material in other parts of the Central State 
Archive and on a close reading of Die Deutsche Hausfrau, 
organ of the RDH from 1925 to 1933 (hereafter referred to as 
DH).

Quataert, Reluctant Feminists, pp. 176-82. Also, 
Gewerkschaftliche Frauenzeitung, March 15, 1916 (hereafter 
referred to as GFZ). The GFZ was a special publication for 
women unionists and wives of male unionists published by 
the German labor federation, Allgemeiner Deutscher 
Gewerkschaftsbund, from 1916 to 1933. Its reportage on the 
Zentralverband der Hausangestellten, an affiliate of the 
federation, is a major source for the organized domestic 
servants in this article.

DH, special tenth anniversary issue, May 6, 1925, p. 2.


DH, May 6, 1925, p. 3.

Evans, The Feminist Movement in Germany, p. 212.

Agnes von Zahn-Harnack and Hans Sveistrup, Die Frauenfrage 
in Deutschland. Strömungen und Gegenströmungen 1790-1930 
Anna Bloß embodies the ambiguous relationship of German feminism with other German politics. At the founding of the Housewives Union, she headed the work committee for Württemberg. DH, May 6, 1925, p. 4. Yet, years later, she published Die Frauenfrage im Lichte des Sozialismus (Dresden: Kaden, 1930), with A. Schreiber, Louise Schroeder, and Anne Geyer.

The Landwirtschaftliche Hausfrauenvereine were rural housewives associations first organized in East Prussia in 1889 and, with other regionals formed later, federated into a national organization after World War I. Much of the leadership came from the class of large estate owners, though the base was broader, reaching into the peasantry. The Reichsverband landwirtschaftlicher Hausfrauenvereine was affiliated with the Reichslandbund, formerly Bund der Landwirte, under Junker leadership.

and mutuality. However, they were increasingly drawn into the struggle between domestics and employers. Small and unmilitant, they peaked at less than half the size of the secular Central Union in 1919; 11,900 is the figure given by Adolf Weber, Der Kampf zwischen Kapital und Arbeit, 5th ed. rev. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1930), p. 104.

27 GFZ, October 10, 1917.
28 GFZ, April 9, 1919.
29 GFZ, March 6, 1919.
30 GFZ, April 23, 1919.
32 Central State Archive, Potsdam, Vorläufiger Reichswirtschaftsrat (hereafter VRWR), Akten 520-21, covering sessions of the Social Policy Committee considering the domestic employees' legislation from October 10, 1921 to May 4, 1922.
34 GFZ, October 3, 1919.
35 Luise Kühler pointed this out, VRWR, Akte 520, p. 481.
36

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Female resident domestics</th>
<th>Female nonresident domestics</th>
<th>Total female domestics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>1,144,385</td>
<td>254,669</td>
<td>1,399,054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>1,016,022</td>
<td>294,417</td>
<td>1,310,439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>843,530</td>
<td>366,792</td>
<td>1,210,322</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ratio of nonresident to resident domestics doubled from 22 percent in 1907 to 44 percent in 1933. Germany, Statistisches Amt, Wirtschaft und Statistik, vol. 7 (1927), pp. 450, 454, for 1907 and 1925 figures. W&S, vol. 15 (1935), Sonderbeilage 14, p. 19, for 1933 figures, which also indicate that only 1,043,156 were actually employed. Germany, Statistisches Amt, Statistik des Deutschen Reiches, vol. 453, Part 2, p. 7, states that the percentage of employed women in domestic service dropped from 16.5 percent in 1907 to 11.4 percent in 1925 and to 10.5 percent in 1933.

37 This is a major theme of Theresa M. McBride, The Domestic Revolution: The Modernization of Household Service in England
Towards the Holocaust


38 The Housewives Union claimed that the majority of their members employed nonresident domestics in a February 23, 1923 letter to the Labor Ministry; RAM, Akte 6450, pp. 19-20.

39 VRUR, Akte 520, p. 533.
40 VRUR, Akte 521, pp. 11-26.
41 VRUR, Akte 521, pp. 367, 378.
42 VRUR, Akte 521, pp. 573-88.
43 VRUR, Akte 521, p. 624.
44 VRUR, Akte 1391, p. 13.
45 RAM, Akte 10402, p. 7.
46 VRUR, Akte 1391, pp. 52-53.
47 DH, August 1929, pp. 113-14; September 1929, pp. 130-31; September 1930, pp. 132-34.
48 GFZ, July 15, 1928.
49 GFZ, December 15, 1920.
50 GFZ, November 15 and December 15, 1929.
52 Some households deprived themselves and their help of necessaries in order to keep their ranking by the show of domestic employment. GFZ, March 15, 1932.
53 Pamela Horn, The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant (New


54 RAH, Akte 10402, pp. 37-33.
55 RAH, Akte 10402, p. 35.
56 Anna Blos in GFZ, November 6, 1918 and in Die Frauenfrage, p. 25.
57 GFZ, January 1, 1919 and repeatedly up to its dissolution in 1933.
58 RAH, Akte 10402, pp. 40-45.
59 GFZ, September 24 and October 3, 1919.
60 DH, July 1925, p. 190 and September 1925, p. 268.
61 GFZ, February 23, 1921.
62 DH, July 1925, p. 190 and September 1925, p. 3.
63 Decree of January 26, 1920 as reported in GFZ, May 4, 1921.
64 VBRK, Akte 1390, pp. 13-16.
65 GFZ, May 31, 1922.
66 GFZ, January 15, 1928.
67 GFZ, February 15, 1930.

In 1919, the organization representing hospitals and institutional homes also tried to come under the pending domestic service legislation, claiming that their maintenance workers previously had come under the Gesinde laws. Organized public service workers, who had won the eight-hour day, objected that they had jurisdiction for such employees in public institutions. The Labor Ministry agreed with the latter. VBRK, Akte 1390, pp. 210-19, 228-30, 234-37, 244-49.

72 Ibid., p. 16.
73 GFZ, October 5, 1922, p. 147.
74 DH., August 1930, p. 115 and January 1931, p. 4.
75 GFZ, June 15, 1931.
76 DH, January 1931, p. 36.
77 DH, March 1932, pp. 35-36.
78 DH, August 1933, pp. 113-15.
79 DH, October 1932, p. 147.
80 GFZ, May 15, 1932.
81 DH, May 1933, p. 70.
82 DH, June 1933, p. 90.
83 DH, August 1933, pp. 115-16.
85 Claudia Koonz, "Mothers in the Fatherland: Women in Nazi Germany," Becoming Visible: Women in European History, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977), p. 460, shows the degree to which the Housewives Union's program was implemented in the Third Reich. To what extent the same personnel remained at various national and regional levels of leadership is a matter for further research.