

Ambiguities of Life in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany During the Interwar Period

After the First World War eradicated of norms and social codes of the nineteenth century, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany stood as bastions of modernity. Modern features of these regimes included the persecution of internal enemies, the roles of masses in society, total state intrusion into the private and public spheres of ordinary people, and changes in gender roles. Although modernity affected Soviet and Nazi Fascism differently, parallels between the two can be drawn. Eugenia Ginzburg's *Journey Into The Whirlwind* and Marion Kaplan's monograph *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* present the stories of those who fell victim to the modern state at the micro level and reflect the irrationality and dystopian change associated with the modern era at the macro level.

In her 1998 monograph *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany*, Marion Kaplan, historian and noted professor of Hebrew and Judaic studies at Columbia University, analyzes Jewish life, and more specifically German Jewish women's lives, before conditions for the Second World War were exacerbated. Kaplan argues that the Jewish community underwent a 'social death' in the 1930s that was required for their later annihilation in 1939. By supplying the reader with many cases of the impact on Jewish families via quotes and testimonies, Kaplan is able to offer the complexity of daily and ordinary Jewish existence in Nazi Germany even before the Final Solution in 1941. Kaplan's analysis of Jewish life in Nazi Germany reflects the values of the regime and the zeitgeist of the modern era: dehumanization, irrationality, and the obsession with the internal enemy.

Similarly, Eugenia Ginzburg's memoir *Journey into The Whirlwind* (1967) captures her experience as an imprisoned party member during the height of Stalinist party purges after

Kirov's assassination in 1934. Through her memoir Ginzburg is able to give a first hand account of the purges and the corrosive effect on the public and private spheres of life in the Soviet Union. Ginzburg's position as an esteemed female professor and active party member in the memoir demonstrates the progressive stance on women under the Communist regime. Accordingly, Ginzburg offers insights into the lives of people affected by the modern state and the characteristics of the modern era itself concerning themes like dehumanization, norms on gender, and total war. By supplying a detailed narrative of her experience in the prison, she reveals the modern character of the mechanized regime itself.

The modern era impacted roles of gender differently in the two contexts. In *Journey Into The whirlwind* Eugenia Ginzburg lived life as an esteemed professor, committed party member, and caring mother before her downfall. These several identities reflected the change in women's roles as seen in the dystopian change brought forth by WWI. The progressive notion of incorporating women into mass society through politics was a radical idea that broke traditional notions of gender roles. When urged to flee by her grandmother, Ginzburg retorts "But how can I, Grandmother? How can I leave everything, the children, my work?" (Ginzburg, 22). The duality of gender roles (as mother and editor-in-chief) is here presented when Ginzburg refers to her children and work as her everything, alluding to her role in the public and private spheres. While in Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, there were few women involved in professional lives, most of them were seen as procreation machines.

Although German women were pushed into the private sphere, race informed the dichotomy that occurred between German Jewish women and 'Aryan' women. Aryan women conformed to the Nazi racial ideology, which emphasized racial purity, by remaining uninvolved in the public sphere. German Jewish wives found themselves having to support their families

emotionally and financially after their husbands were imprisoned or stripped of their assets as exemplified in this quote: “Gender roles in Jewish families shifted because devastating economic, social, and emotional realities forced families to embrace strategies that they would never have entertained in ordinary times ” (Kaplan 59). The role reversal between Jewish men and women here demonstrates how a perverted racial ideology reshaped the German Jewish family unity and how German Jewish women had to step forward pragmatically. The German modern totalitarian regime stressed an irrational racial ideology that inadvertently empowered German Jewish women.

Major themes that also emerged from World War I were the obsession with the internal enemies and total war. Although both regimes engaged in internal enemy persecution and total war, the Soviet Union did it for a political agenda underlining class equality while Nazis emphasized racial purity. Modern notions of reaching an ideal aesthetic state of living for the German people as seen in *Kultur* in World War I guided German actions and policies under Nazism. To maintain a pure ‘Aryan’ race the Nazi regime used tactical violence towards those who threatened mainstream society and these tended to be homosexuals, gypsies, prostitutes, cripples, and ultimately Jews. German Jews were seen as an enemy to the ‘Aryan’ race that needed to be socially and physically removed. Kaplan referred to the eradication of Jews from the social fabric of Germany as a “social death”. Thus ostracism characterized by social death was the prerequisite to the later dehumanization of the Final Solution in 1941.

Instead of a tactical violence anchored in racial ideology, internal enemies in the Soviet Union were sought after based on their class background as seen during Lenin’s time. After Lenin’s death in 1924 and Stalin’s takeover, the party focused on party members. Ginzburg was now seen as the new internal enemy even though she belonged to the party. As opposed to Nazi

focus on racial components, the Soviet Union during Stalinist party purges highlighted Ginzburg's persecution based on her bourgeois background thus condemning her as an internal enemy. In order to maintain the political dominance of the communist party Stalin waged a total war on his own party and people. While German Jews were racially targeted members of the Nazi state that were to be removed, individuals such as Ginzburg who were denounced politically in the Soviet Union were to be isolated and cleansed of their disloyalties towards the party. Accordingly, Ginzburg's account reflects the conviction of internal enemies as being a group outside of the state: "Enemies are not people. We're allowed to do what we want like with them. People indeed!" (Ginzburg, 63).

In both books members of the state that were persecuted remained ostracized, dehumanized, and regimented. Furthermore, no fixed norms or social codes about moral boundaries could be applied to such people. Both Eugenia Ginzburg and the German Jews were removed from the state and therefore any actions taken towards them could not be accounted for. In totalitarian states where the life of the state and party was held supreme, no norms existed concerning the treatment of people deemed outsiders of the state. Ultimately, themes of the modern era like the lack of fixed norms, dehumanization, mechanized total war all culminated in the height of persecution in these regimes.

Kultur, a spiritual aesthetic state of living was important for mass mobilization in the modern era. In Kaplan's *monograph* she argued that German Jewish men found the notion of leaving Germany impossible mostly because of their strong liberal connection to the Deutschland. The patriotic connection formed a male German Jewish identity deeply embedded in the public sphere. Women found the need to flee the modern state that persecuted them: "Men, on the other hand, felt more at home with culture and politics. Generally more educated

than their wives, they cherished what they regarded as German culture – the culture of German enlightenment” (Kaplan, 65). On the eve of persecution male German Jews still felt a connection to the *volk* and the modern aesthetic of a German enlightened existence as expressed in *Kultur*. While in the early years (1933- 1938) of the Nazi reign, German Jewish men felt attached to the German nation, in the Soviet case, persons like Ginzburg felt entirely committed to the Bolshevik party.

The *Journey Into The Whirlwind* demonstrates all Soviet citizens’ devout commitment to the Bolshevik party. Although people from all social ranks and classes were targeted indiscriminately during the party purges, in Ginzburg’s book, those imprisoned sought an answer from the very state that imprisoned. Prisoners believed that their capture was a mistake resulting from treason throughout the party ranks and the same treason that Stalin had already highlighted. Because the state had subverted the Soviet masses through propaganda and persecution, the illogical rationale for the purges had become the new norm thus making the Soviet masses conform to these purges. This can be seen in Ginzburg’s declaration: “ No, this was something I could not do. Even though I felt obscurely, without having any proof, that Stalin was behind the nightmare events in our party, I could not say that I disagreed with the Party line” (Ginzburg, 75). Ginzburg’s commitment is parallel sentiment that Jewish men felt for the liberal German nation.

For Jewish men their national identity and involvement in the public sphere kept them loyal to Germany, while Ginzburg’s political and national identities kept her from fleeing Moscow. The subjugation of the individual to the state was a common theme in the modern era. Involvement in mass society meant the state’s interests superseded the individuals’ interests. Ginzburg held a national and political identity deeply connected to the Soviet state and so did

Male German Jews to the *Volk*. While German Jews faced social death in Nazi Germany, in the Soviet Union, arrested party members faced social ostracism. Male German Jews believed firmly that the *Volk* could not ostracize them and this same feeling can be seen in Ginzburg, who felt the party could not wrong her.

Most importantly state intrusion in the public and private sphere of life in both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union was a common feature of these modern regimes. Kaplan does a fine job of analyzing the political ramifications of the Nuremberg laws and subsequent impact on family life. After 1935 Jews were classified as subjects of the state and stripped of their citizenship, while “Aryans” were made “citizens of the Reich” (Kaplan 77). The Nuremberg Laws demonstrated a modern regime imposing itself directly onto mass society and dictated who were and were not members of the state. Similarly, the Nuremberg Laws had a significant impact on the private life of Jews in Germany. Jews were divided based on how Jewish they were according to the *Mischlinge*, mixed blood, hierarchy. Those classified as full Jews were forbidden to marry ‘Aryan’ partners, while second degree *Mischlinge* with only one Jewish grandparent were permitted to marry Aryans. As a result, Jewish families were broken physically and mentally. Some Aryan spouses pressured their Jewish partners into fleeing or killing themselves because of the Reich’s policies.

On the other side of the artificially constructed racial spectrum, ‘Aryan’ Germans were being directly affected by the Nazi regime as well. In the public sphere party membership for ‘Aryan’ men allowed them to be more politically and economically embedded with the *Volk*. Although ‘Aryan’ women under the patriarchal Nazi system were mostly restricted to the private sphere, party membership was seen as almost a necessity for men. Party membership opened opportunities to the highest political and military ranks and this confirmed one’s support to the

Reich and secured one's family's ability to eat. More particularly the engagement of 'Aryan' men into mass society and politics reflects the state's role in the public sphere. Furthermore, the private sphere of 'Aryan' life under the regime was affected equally. Children were indoctrinated into the Nazi Youth, as the family unit became a procreator of fascist ideology and involvement.

In the Soviet Union Ginzburg's book captures the intensity in which the state was involved in public and private lives. Divisions in family arose when suspicions of anti-communist activity happened within the home. For example, one spouse would denounce the other and this would leave children in broken homes or orphanages. In the case of Ginzburg, the Great Purges of Stalin resulted in her conviction and subsequent separation from her husband and children. The modern state interfered in Ginzburg's public life by stripping her of her political membership and profession. The continued imprisonment of people based on irrational charges in the public sphere altered the national psyche that self-propelled the regime's corrosive effect on the private sphere. As Ginzburg put it, "It was like a psychosis: good and sensible people who had been on friendly terms would suddenly see in their neighbors potential spies and *provocateurs*" (Ginzburg 164). As people saw others around them losing their jobs, being kicked out from the party, and sent to prison, the familial and social relations became more vulnerable to the penetration of the irrationality featured in the modern era.

Ultimately both Kaplan's monograph and Ginzburg's memoir capture not only the experience of marginalized groups under the Nazi and Soviet Communist regimes, but also themes associated with the modern era. Modern features of these regimes include the obsession with the internal enemies, a dystopian change in gender roles, the engagement of mass society, and state intrusion into the public and private spheres of people's lives. Jewish women became

empowered in Nazi Germany as their husbands were stripped of their assets and wealth, however “Aryan” women conformed to Nazi racial ideology and remained in the private sphere. Ginzburg’s position as a professor, party member, and mother gave her several identities in the public and private sphere and reflected the Soviet progressive stance on women that changed old gender roles. The Soviet Union persecuted internal enemies under the Stalinist party purges for a political agenda after Lenin’s death, while in Nazi Germany, the rationale behind the persecution of undesirables and eventually the social and physical death of German Jews was anchored on irrational racial ideology.

Works Cited

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