

*The 'Mother's Cross':  
bronze for bearing  
four or five children.*

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# Nazi Family Policy Towards 'a Strong and Pure German Nation'

The Nazis wanted to increase the German population, but sought to ensure that the children born conformed to idealised Nazi stereotypes.

The impact of the First World War and of significant social changes during the Weimar years, as well as the economic depression following the Wall Street Crash in 1929, meant that by 1933, when the Nazis came to power, the German family was in a state of crisis. The German birth-rate was in long-term decline. The new Nazi regime promised to redress 'the crisis of the family' and to introduce policies to increase the nation's birth-rate.

Much of Nazi family ideology was not particularly original — it built upon an existing conservative and traditionalist backlash to Weimar modernisation. However, in its desire to form a 'national community' based upon Nazi principles, and especially racial purity, the Hitler govern-

*A German mother in the 1930s with eight children.*

ment implemented distinctive policies towards the family. Aiming at the creation of a strong and pure German nation, the Nazis were concerned not just with raising the birth-rate in numerical terms, but also with the 'quality' of the future generation. They introduced policies designed to increase the number of births among the 'racially pure', healthy, socially 'fit' sectors of the population. They aimed to raise the status of ideal families with four or more children, which they termed *kinderreich* ('rich in children').

At the same time they implemented policies designed to discourage the birth of children in those families that did not fit into the society they sought to create. Such families consisted of the 'racially inferior' (Jewish or 'gypsy' families) and those that they considered to be 'asocial' or 'unfit', for reasons of behaviour, political allegiance or ill-health.

## The Weimar background

The Weimar era was characterised by a continual struggle between two opposing forces — one for instigating change and the other for upholding tradition. Modernisation, urbanisation and moves towards women's emancipation during the Weimar years had a deep impact upon German society in general and upon the family in particular. The positive effects of modernisation in Weimar society saw advances in health care and

welfare and a boom in the leisure industry, with many cinemas, theatres, clubs and cafés springing up in the cities. The cities themselves were growing larger and larger because of the movement of people from the countryside to the towns.

These changes offered a new and liberated lifestyle to those women who wanted it. Many moved to the cities to work as secretaries, shorthand typists, shop assistants and waitresses. They grew in confidence as they earned their own money, became independent of their families, cut their hair into the fashionable bob and dressed in modern, casual styles. But at the same time modernisation and urbanisation were accompanied by sexual promiscuity, rising rates of divorce and abortion, the decline of the family, falling birth-rates and higher numbers of illegitimate children being born.

Population policy experts were full of gloom and doom about the impact of these changes upon the future of the nation. They predicted the 'death of the nation' as a result of widespread use of contraception and the limiting of the family size to two children. Many religious and conservative groups sprang up in the Weimar years that campaigned against women's emancipation, against birth-control and against abortion. Such groups included the League of Queen Louise and the Evangelical Women's Federation. Other groups, such as the National League of Large Families, were concerned with the sharp decline in the nation's birth-rate and promoted families with four or more children as a means of action against the Weimar trend of the two-child family.

The Nazis capitalised on this backlash against the Weimar liberalisation of society and its impact upon the family and pledged to redress these concerns. They claimed that they would raise the status of the family, which they termed 'the germ cell of the nation'.

### Encouraging 'quality' births

Once in power, the Nazis introduced a whole series of measures and incentives to achieve their goal of increasing the birth-rate. One of their main priorities was to promote marriages between healthy 'Aryan' partners. Propaganda played an important part in encouraging such marriages. For example, the 'Ten Commandments for Choosing a Spouse' included the following:

- Remember that you are a German.
- If you are hereditarily healthy you should not remain single.
- Keep your body pure.
- As a German, choose only a spouse of the same or of Nordic blood.
- When choosing your spouse, ask about his/her ancestors.
- You should hope to have as many children as possible.

In June 1933 the Marriage Loan Scheme was set up to promote such marriages. A loan of 1,000 RM was made to a German couple in the form of vouchers for the purchase of furniture and household equipment. At first the loans were given to a couple only if the wife agreed to give up her job, although in 1937 this condition was removed. In addition, the loan was only made if the political affiliation and 'way of life' of the couple were acceptable. It was denied to couples if either or both partners had connections with the Communist Party, or had had such connections in the past, and it was denied to prostitutes and the 'workshy'. The repayment of the loan was reduced by one quarter for each child born, and was completely cancelled out with the birth of the fourth child.

In 1938 a new divorce law was introduced. This allowed for a divorce if a couple had lived apart for 3 years or more and the marriage had effectively broken down. On the surface this appeared to be a liberal policy. But the reasoning behind it lay more in potential benefits to the state than to private individuals. The Nazis believed that once a divorce had been granted, the two partners involved might then remarry and provide the nation with more children. The law also allowed for divorces to be granted on grounds of premature infertility and either partner's refusal to have a child. Such terms clearly demonstrate that the law was designed to realise the Nazis' desire for an increased birth-rate.

The pro-natalist aims of the Nazi regime could not be met with the prevailing climate in German society of relatively easy access to birth-control advice and contraceptives, and with the effects of the relaxation of the abortion laws during the Weimar years. The Nazis, therefore, closed down family-planning centres and prohibited the use of contraceptives. The regime was able to use the Law for the Protection of the People and State of 28 February 1933 to ban birth-control organisations on the grounds that they were 'Marxist'. In January 1941 Himmler's Police Ordinance categorically banned the production and distribution of contraceptives.

The Nazi regime also tightened up the abortion laws by the reintroduction of Paragraphs 219 and 220 of the Criminal Code, which made provisions for harsher punishments for abortion. Finally, in 1943, the death penalty was introduced for anyone performing an abortion to terminate a 'valuable' pregnancy, as this was considered to be an act of 'racial sabotage' during the crisis of the war.

Attempts to raise the status of motherhood and *kinderreich* families included the Cross of Honour of the German Mother, which was awarded to prolific mothers — in bronze, silver and gold for four, six and eight children respectively. The stress on motherhood and childbirth played an

important role in Nazi propaganda. Many radio programmes were broadcast daily whose contents were specifically aimed at mother and child, and newspaper and magazine articles often enhanced the status of motherhood and of *kinderreich* families. With the aim of encouraging couples to have more children the regime gave child benefits to *kinderreich* families, as well as concessions including free theatre tickets and reduced railway fares. Many of these families also received discounts on gas, electricity and water rates.

### Discouraging 'undesirable' births

Simultaneously, the more blatantly sinister side of Nazi population policy was taking place — that is, legal measures to discourage and prevent undesirable births. In September 1935 the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour (one of the Nuremberg Laws) banned marriages and sexual relationships between Jews and Aryans. In October 1935 the Law for the Protection of the Hereditary Health of the German People (or Marriage Health Law) was passed. This prevented marriages between healthy Aryans and those deemed unfit for marriage due to physical or mental illness. In order to marry it was necessary to undergo a medical examination first. If a couple passed this the local health authorities

### Nazi legislation on the family: key dates

<b>February 1933</b>	Law for the Protection of the People and State bans birth-control organisations.
<b>June 1933</b>	Introduction of Marriage Loan Scheme to encourage early marriages between healthy, 'Aryan' spouses.
<b>January 1934</b>	Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring enacts compulsory sterilisation.
<b>September 1935</b>	Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour bans marriages and sexual relationships between Jews and Aryans.
<b>October 1935</b>	Law for the Protection of the Hereditary Health of the German People prevents marriages between healthy Aryans and people with hereditary illnesses.
<b>January 1941</b>	Himmler's Police Ordinance bans the production and distribution of contraceptives.
<b>March 1943</b>	Introduction of death penalty for practitioners of abortion.

issued a 'certificate of fitness to marry'. Such certificates were denied to those with hereditary illnesses or serious infectious diseases.

Sterilisation was the principal method used by the Nazi regime to prevent people it considered 'undesirable' from having children. On 1 January 1934 the sterilisation law (the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring) came into effect. This called for the compulsory sterilisation of anyone who suffered from 'congenital feeble-mindedness, schizophrenia, manic depression, hereditary epilepsy, Huntingdon's chorea, hereditary blindness, hereditary deafness, serious physical deformities and chronic alcoholism'. Between January 1934 and September 1939 about 0.5% of the population — some 320,000 people — were forcibly sterilised under the terms of this law. Whereas some of these came from ethnic minority groups, the majority of them were of German ethnicity but were considered by the regime to be 'hereditarily ill' or simply 'feeble-minded'.

The sterilisation law was the realisation of Hitler's belief, as expressed in *Mein Kampf*, that 'those who are physically and mentally unhealthy and unworthy must not perpetuate their suffering in the body of their children'.

Child benefits, marriage loans and other concessions were denied to both the 'racially inferior' and the 'asocial'. In addition, the increasingly harsh measures introduced for abortion, including the death penalty in 1943, were aimed only at 'valuable' members of society, whereas abortion on eugenic grounds was permissible from 1935 onwards. Jewish women were free to terminate their pregnancies without question from 1938 onwards.

Families that did not fulfil the regime's racial and social criteria were excluded from the 'national community'. The failure of such families to conform to Nazi requirements meant that they were discriminated against, persecuted and ultimately weeded out and 'eliminated'. The family as the 'germ cell of the nation' had to be Aryan, hereditarily healthy, politically reliable and socially 'fit'. To those it considered inferior, especially Jewish, gypsy and 'asocial' families, the Nazi regime pursued a policy of family destruction.

### How successful was Nazi family policy?

There was a slight increase in the nation's birth-rate in the period 1934–39 compared with that of 1930–33. But this was not necessarily attributable to Nazi incentives to promote procreation. In fact it seems that many couples felt more secure about getting married and having children because the economic climate had improved. Hence the number of marriages increased but the number of children per marriage did not. Couples granted a marriage loan had on average only one child.

*Members of the League of German Girls, 10 April 1937. Races and games were encouraged to promote physical fitness.*

Also, Nazi incentives and propaganda were not sufficient on their own to redress the long-term trend in low birth-rates, particularly as there was no commensurate housing policy.

The actual decrease in the number of *kinderreich* families during the Nazi era also demonstrates that German couples were not persuaded by the regime to change the existing trend towards smaller families. The practice of birth-control in Germany could not easily be eradicated by the regime. Nazi laws and propaganda merely meant that such practices were reduced and continued underground rather than eliminated altogether. Much to the displeasure of the regime, the 'two-child family' was perpetuated throughout the Third Reich.

### Was the family restored?

As far as its claims to restore the family were concerned, this was largely rhetoric on the part of the Nazi regime. The Nazis used the family as a vehicle for their own aims rather than upholding it as a social unit. The regime wanted total power and total devotion from its population. Any focus of allegiance other than the state was regarded as a threat. Hence the family, as an alternative focus of loyalty, was a potential hazard to the authorities.

The Nazis tried to resolve this problem in a number of ways. Firstly, they emptied the household of its members by encouraging or obliging them to take part in state-sponsored organisations. Boys went into the Hitler Youth, girls into the League of German Girls, women into the Nazi women's organisations. A popular joke at the time reflected this emptying of the household: 'Father is in the Party, mother in the *Frauenschaft* [Nazi women's group], son in the Hitler Youth, daughter in the League of German Girls. Where does the ideal National Socialist family meet then? At the Reich Party Day in Nuremberg!'

Secondly, the regime took away from the family its role of providing a shelter for its individual members: it did not want the family to act as a refuge from society. Thirdly, it removed the family's educational role by allowing the youth groups and schools completely to usurp this traditional family function and by deliberately fostering tension between the generations.

Finally, the Nazis systematically reduced the functions of the family to the single task of reproduction, aiming to place the family in the service of the state as a breeding and rearing institution. The Nazi regime made allegations about the negative implications of the Weimar period for the family and claimed that it would re-establish the true meaning of the family after the 'liberal capitalists' and 'Marxists' had destroyed its 'moral foundations'. But in reality it was the regime itself that undermined the German family by subjecting it to mechanisms of control and to the racial thinking that was so central to Nazi ideology.

### Further reading

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