

Family Bonds and Coming to Terms with the Nazi Past

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Abstract

This article is about the way generational bonds were affected by Nazism. The Hitler Youth generation, here defined as those born from 1925 to 1933, were children during the Third Reich. Their memoirs, typically written in late adulthood, indicate the problematic nature of coming to terms with the past. This generation's parents were influenced by earlier historical events, and this article seeks to show how many different influences were in place which affected family bonding in the 1930s. Lastly, the article uses two memoirs as examples to show how two different individuals attempted to discuss their families and their pasts.

Keywords: memoir, Third Reich, Nazism, Hitler Youth, generation

Armin Lehmann, born 1928, was a member of what is commonly termed the 'Hitler Youth generation': those born in Germany between 1925 and 1933. Like others of his generation, Lehmann wrote a memoir of his service as a Hitler Youth boy. There, he records the ambivalent political and psychological issues that plagued him and his father (Lehmann and Carroll, 2011). As one of six children living in the Munich borough of Waldtrudering, Lehmann is proud of his mother having six children, as this gave women the highest official recognition in Nazi Germany for motherhood. In this sense, his mother represented motherhood and safety. His father, in contrast, is remembered as a bully doing everything he could to make Lehmann into a proper Nazi man (Lehmann and Carroll, 2011: 10). Working for the Nazi party at the Reich Radio Station made him feel proud, as he 'liked marching off to work once or twice a week in his new black uniform and shiny black boots' (Lehmann and Carroll, 2011: 40). From early childhood, Lehmann struggled against his father's value system and dreams of him becoming a Nazi and his own interest in studying poetry. Placing Lehmann's father's story into a larger historical narrative helps us to understand why many parents of the Hitler Youth generation became Nazis. Family bonds during the time of writing, as well as individual histories of family members, lend insights into the concept of selfhood found through

life narratives. These writings may give insights into the collective experience of the Third Reich through studying the postwar German family dynamic and questioning how the family changed as a result of Nazism. Following the collapse of the Third Reich, we begin to see the publication of Hitler Youth generation memoirs, with people like Lehmann writing about their childhood in an attempt to understand their parents' actions.

Within larger historiography of everyday life, gender and generational bonds are crucial to our understanding of the way men and women were socialised and further socialised their children in the early twentieth century. It also provides a way to understand the concept of the family (Peplar, 2002: 13-14). One thing we ought to consider is the way in which the historical background of the parents affected their reactions, and ultimately their children's, towards Nazism.¹ This is where the historical context of the early twentieth century comes to bear upon the Nazi German family unit, which is often not looked at through a child's perspective.² The end of the First World War left 2 million German men dead and another 4.3 million 'permanently marked as war invalids' (Frevert, 2004: 237). It affected almost all families living during that time. Whilst not all writers gave dates of birth for their parents, they were most likely born in the early twentieth or late nineteenth century. Therefore, some fathers belonged to the 'Front generation', which here means the last men of the German empire. Born circa 1880-1900, they formed the largest voting block and were 30 to 50 years old in 1935, making them the established electorate base (Bessel in Roseman, 1995: 122, 128). Those born in the early twentieth century, either fighting in the First World War or coming of age as the war ended, are known as the war generation and became the fathers and mothers of the Hitler Youth generation. In historiography, these men are discussed through the rise of veterans' organisations in the early post-First World War period and using the *Männerbund*-concept. The *Männerbund*, literally a 'band of men', is a term used to describe the relationship between men who fought in war and had shared experiences. It may be seen as a masculine ideal embodied by the German nation, which only men could achieve (Weisbrod, 2000: 68-73). For some men, the *Männerbund* was a male-oriented political sphere, in which women were not allowed to take part. With these tensions in mind, these same men married in the 1920s, having children from around 1925 onwards.

My condensation of the societal- and identity-based tensions of the period does little justice to them, but is necessary here. Overall, the military culture of the First World War affected younger men, many of whom later became influential in the Nazi party. This younger war generation includes those born from 1900-1908, who had only briefly fought in the war or had not been conscripted to fight. It comprises some of the most famous right-wing Nazis, such as Martin Borman (born 1900), Rudolf Höss (1900), Heinrich Himmler (1900), Kurt Gruber (1904), Reinhard Heydrich (1906) and Baldur von Schirach (1908) (Frederiksen and Wallach, 2000: 337; Weinrich, 2012: 35). These men were educated during the war years and were consequently enveloped by a militaristic culture, which revered the German military (Donson, 2006: 337). As Jürgen Reulecke argues, this male youth culture was already present at the turn of the century, as ideas of 'youth' and 'youth generation' used race and biology to perpetuate a sense of belonging to the wider, generational cohort. This 'youth generation' was then a social structure, politically validated and manipulated: first, through 'socialisation' and then through 'nationalisation', as

evidenced by the Hitler Youth law of 1936 (Reulecke, 2001 Bd. 34:130ff). This context arises out of a concern for how modern industrial and mass consumer societies deal with their offspring, in light of socio-economic, technological, and cultural change (Reulecke, 2001 Bd. 34:150). The main reason for men turning to paramilitary groups was that ‘the *Freikorps*, the SA, the Nazi Party, and other right-wing militarist and nationalist groups allowed younger men to act out their puerile, masculine fantasies about becoming nationalist soldiers’ (Donson, 2006: 339). Once these men were radicalised as politicians, they did not respond appropriately to the economic plight and high inflation of the early 1920s. Thus these changes to society during the First World War caused men to govern in new, irresponsible ways that had both a generational and societal impact.

The modernisation of the Weimar Republic, combined with gender identities imbued with tradition, caused women to be prone to psychosocial anxiety. The social change of the 1920s clashed with traditionalist and conservative views, and in some instances, challenged the perceived social order. Studies on women in the Weimar Republic – and the coming of the New Woman, which historians understand as a mixture of women’s emancipation and modernisation – in Germany have set historians into two, opposing camps (See, for divided views Peukert 1987; Frevert 1989). For example, Ute Frevert argues that the New Woman was just media hype, nothing more (Frevert, 1989: 176–177). Others argue that the New Woman is a form of propaganda, or that it ignored the issue of gender inequality. The image of the New Woman was most controversial in Germany because it represented the ‘family in crisis’ and ‘moral depravity’; moreover, the 1920s were a period of change in women’s social positions, as women demanded more civil and sexual rights (Usborne, 1995: 137–138; Usborne, 1992: 85, 95). Political parties, such as the KPD and SDP supported women’s sexual emancipation in their journals. These magazines show that women engaged with society around them, demanding changes to apprehend equality in divorce and marriage. In addition, the way young women and older women’s rights activists understood the challenges of female emancipation differed, making female generational conflicts another clashing point.

Families during the Nazi period

Families of all political affiliations and religions had to re-negotiate the everyday, in terms of political powers, post-January 1933. Some writers noticed the building tension, as they record the experiences and collective memory of 1920s events. Large, cheering crowds preceded Hitler’s rise to power in January 1933, as Melita Maschmann (b. 1918) recalls in her well-known memoir *Fazit*:

On the evening of January 30 my parents took us children, my twin brother and myself, into the centre of the city. There we witnessed the torchlight procession with which the National Socialists celebrated their victory. Some of the uncanny feel of that night remains with me even today. The crashing tread of the feet, the sombre pomp of the red and black flags, the flickering light from the torches on the faces and the songs with melodies that were at once aggressive and sentimental.[sic] (Maschmann, Burkenroad, and Epstein 2013, Kindle location 254 of 4645)

Hans Peter Richter, in his fictional autobiography *Wir waren dabei* (*I Was There*), also relates events from that night, watching the dark shadows play on the wall of his room. He could hear the words, ‘Germany awake!’ as marching groups passed by (Richter, 1977: 1–3). The daily routines of children changed slowly: education became Nazified, joining the Hitler Youth became compulsory in 1936, and association with Jews was frowned upon (Rempel, 1989: 48). Following on from the eventful night of 30 January 1933 the recently crumbled Weimar Republic and its democracy lived on in the memories of the Hitler Youth generation’s parents. By analysing the memoirs of the Hitler Youth generation’s parents, the effects of Nazism on the familial bonds may be seen.

In some memoirs, family bonds unravel when the writer discovers the extent of their parents’ involvement with the Nazis. The impact of having two Nazi parents is visible in Adolph D’s *Erinnerungen* (*Memories*), written between 1997 and 2000. Attached to the memoir is his *Lebenslauf* (*Resume*), in which he indicates that after having a life crisis in the 1970s, he changed the spelling of his name from Adolf to Adolph. He begins his own tale by retelling his grandfather’s life story, and then reflects on his father and mother. Living in small village named Heimburg in central Germany – a village that would later become a part of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) – the family was prosperous, owning a large farm and house. Both parents were members of the Nazi party, of which Adolph D. was relatively unaware until he later discovered his father’s involvement. Portraying his father as a lonely man during World War I who joined the war-effort in search of *Geistesbildung* (a spiritual education), he expresses surprise at his father’s NSDAP membership:

Erst sehr viel später erfuhr ich, daß er Mitglied der NSDAP geworden sei, eine braune Uniform hat er allerdings nicht gehabt. Er hatte gegen jenes Unwesen, obwohl er nicht entschieden Stellungnahme, offenbar eine gefühlsmäßige Abneigung.

[Only much later I learned that he had become a member of the Nazi party. However, he did not have a brown uniform. Apparently he had an emotional aversion, as he had been against that mischief, but he did not decisively state his position, as he still took part.]

(DTA Reg. Nr. 3511,1, pp. 8-10)

As Adolph D’s revelations about his father’s Nazi past indicate, the straining bond between himself and his father was only noticeable many years later.

His relationship with his mother, Anne Marie, was already strained during the Nazi period. His mother had been a part of the *NS-Frauenschaft*, which was the official Nazi women’s league. Whilst the *NS-Frauenschaft* was a way for women to do work outside of the private sphere, it still held onto traditional ideas of women’s work (Dagmar Reese, 1995: 235). As a women’s leader, she was entrenched in Nazi ideology; because she forced her children to adhere to Nazi ideology and practises, such as joining the Hitler Youth, he blames her most for his indoctrination. As he writes in his memoir, he attributes his submersion and unquestionable belief in Hitler to his ‘good mother with all her powers of persuasion and morals’. She told her children stories from a ‘beautiful book’, by

nineteenth century author Franz Schneider, who in her words, was ‘from the Führer himself’; Adolf D. recounts, ‘That was a cheesy story of how the good Lord had laid a grain for Hitler’s later leadership in the soul of a boy, and then, how this is soul grew and how it was our Führer who emerged’ (DTA Reg. Nr. 3511,1, p. 45). He returns to discussions of his education in various points of the narrative, and between segments of writing about his Nazi mother, writes longer chapters on his various relatives and the memories he has of them. Writing thematically about his experiences over the years allows Adolph D. to reflect on his family’s motivations for attaining power through the Nazi party; it also enables him to identify and understand himself in late adulthood.

Margaret W. (b. 1931) approaches the story of her family life and familial bonds rather differently. Her memoir, titled *Erinnerungen an die Familie Luzeier 1800-1984 (Memories of the Luzeier Family)* was written in 2002, and centres not on her own life, but on the lives of multiple generations of family members. The most interesting stories are those concerning her life, however. Living in Blauberer-Pappelau on the Swabian Alb in southern Germany, Margaret W. recounts her family’s story in the third-person, with a tone reminiscent of fairy tales or folk stories. The reader is not given minute details of her family; the story is somewhat generalised, though it depicts all the characters positively. She does not refer to herself as Margaret but as Elisabeth, which is her second middle name. She talks of her grandmother, Freida, as a woman who ‘gave birth to many children’ and she survived a ‘terrible famine’ by ‘eating herbs they gathered in the frost’ (DTA Sig. Reg. Nr. 1017.II, p. 16). She does not provide dates for the famine, but it is highly possible that she indicates the Turnip Winter of 1917, during which lack of access to food caused problems on the home front (Kocka, 1984: 41–43). As there are many gaps in her account indicating the difficulties of telling the story of the effect of Nazism on the family, it is difficult to remain confident about the family history and their reactions towards Nazism.

The family bond presented in the memoir is strong; yet the silence within this tight-knit family may indicate that Nazism weakened their bonds. In recounting the story of her mother Frida, the eldest girl in the family, she tells us that her mother was a ‘technically skilled’ girl, who learned how to sew underwear and later founded a sewing school. Frida’s autonomy in furthering her education is a symptom of social change during this period – even if that education was, still, in a traditional woman’s trade. She married a Catholic priest named Karl S. on September 30 1930, and the couple seemed to enjoy an idyllic life. It comes somewhat as a surprise, then, when Margaret W. mentions the political climate in the winter 1927-8:

Politisch waren es unruhige Jahre, man hatte gerade eine große Inflation mit Geldentwertung hinter sich gebracht. 1927/28 folgte eine fürchterlich kalter Winter, bei dem viele frisch gelegte Wasserleitungen in den Häusern einfach zufroren. Der Schaden war riesengroß. Die Natur erholte sich erst sehr spät von diesem „Kälteschock“. In Österreich stand ein Mann auf, der laut und angeberisch neue goldene Jahre versprach. Er träumte vom 1000jährigen Reich und von seiner Sendung als Führer.

[Politically, they were troubled years, as we had just gotten a big inflation after leaving the earlier inflation behind. 1927/28 followed a terribly cold winter, in which the houses simply froze many with freshly laid water pipes. The damage was huge. Nature recovered very late of this 'cold shock'. In Austria, a man stood up; he promised loudly and pretentiously of new golden years. He dreamed of the 1,000-year Reich and his mission as the Führer.] (DTA Reg. Nr. 1017.II, p. 16)

It is worth noting that while Margaret W. recounts events before her birth, she never mentions how these events affected her life as a child and adolescent. She records, instead, memories of her father's parents, of good times spent at their house in the neighbouring village. She avoids questions about Nazism and the effect this had on her family. These silences in the text chronicle the changes to her family culture before, during, and after the Third Reich. In addition, they emphasize the importance of doing a close reading of autobiographical works. Whilst one might expect her to discuss the rise of Hitler, along with her family's reaction, she does not. Silences are not uncommon in the memoir genre, and may be attributed to a loss of memory or deliberate avoidance. Nonetheless, the silence itself ought to be analysed and discussed.

It goes without saying that family bonds change over time. However the effects of Nazism become more noticeable in the way families are discussed. As with Armin Lehmann's narrative, the strain between father and son that began already during the Nazi period impacted his relationship for the rest of his life. For Adolph D., the integrity of his family came into question after the fall of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1989, when he discovered his father's involvement in the Nazi party. His mother's teachings show the way political ideologies and totalitarianism are passed down through family pastimes and traditions. Margaret W., on the other hand, uses silence as a method of re-interpreting familial bonds in her writing. Studying family life and the relationships the Hitler Youth generation had with their families shows complex ideas of selfhood, subjectivities and the collective experience of the Third Reich. When looking back into their pasts, these writers indicate various ways of dealing with their families, often controversial, political leanings. The ways in which these individuals attempt to deal with the realisation, or new knowledge, of their family's past illustrates how family life can be re-interpreted at later life stages.

Endnotes

1 See article by Venken and Röger, 2015: 203ff on childhood during the Second World War in Europe.

2 See studies Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives under the Nazis*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2005. Print; Dan Bar-On. *Legacy of Silence: Encounters with Children of the Third Reich*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989. Print.; Michlic, Joanna Beata. 'The War Began for Me after the War' *Jewish Children in Poland, 1945-1949*. Ed. Jonathan Friedman. London: Routledge, 2011. 484-499. Print.

3 All English translations from German are my own

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Biography

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