

## The Female Nazi vs *Aufseherinnen*: Fetishizing the Women Camp Guards of Concentration Camps

By

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### **Introduction:**

Women who sought liberation from the mother archetype in Nazi Germany could gain a sort of independence and power as guards inside concentration camps. However, as they broke from the acceptable norm and threatened the patriarchal structure of the Reich, these women were restricted to new archetypes by Western patriarchal societies. The female camp guards were restricted to being described as a bitch or a slut. The new titles persisted and were revitalized in recent films, tabloids and video games, all adhering to specific criteria. They are blonde, always in uniform, usually with a weapon in hand, and are particularly cruel, perhaps even more so than their male colleagues; yet, they possess a hyper-sexuality frequently expressed as sadism. I've taken to calling this image the "Female Nazi". The "Female Nazi" image, based off of the female guard, was constructed as a memory idealization, second-hand knowledge from narrative history and news circuits, and has fallen into two female archetypes – the bitch and the slut. This image has been sensationalized in tabloids such as The Daily Mail's January 11, 2015 article, "Giggling Over Genocide: They Flirted With the S.S, Wore Pink Underwear and Even had a Hair Salon- The Female Death Camp guards as Evil as the Men" by Sara Helm<sup>1</sup>. The image was exploited in a wave of pornographic films released in the 1970's to 1980's; films

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Helm. "Giggling over genocide: They flirted with the SS, wore pink underwear and even had a hair salon- the female death camp guards as evil as the men". *The Daily Mail*. January 11, 2015. Accessed October 1, 2017. Sarah Helm is a journalist who has written a book on Ravensbruck called *If This is a Woman: Inside Ravensbruck, Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women* (2015) and this article from the Daily Mail promotes this book in such a way as to capitalize on the "Female Nazi" archetype.

such as Canadian film *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS* or Italian film *The Beast in Heat*.<sup>2</sup> And the image has appeared most recently in video games, specifically, the Wolfenstein series.<sup>3</sup> The actual experiences of the female concentration camp guards, or *Aufseherinnen*, can provide insight into how Western patriarchal societies created these archetypal figures and how gender expectations have misconstrued the history of the *Aufseherinnen*. In many cases, what is said about these women highlights Western patriarchal society's subjectification of women in general.

I argue that archetypes are restrictive and ignore the complexities of human experience, especially with women and specifically with *Aufseherinnen*. Archetypes do exist; in cultures around the world there are examples of labelling people as archetypes from ancient mythologies to American advertisements.<sup>4</sup> The *Aufseherinnen* have been reduced to an archetype post-WWII as the "Female Nazi". The female guards of the Holocaust's concentration camps have been reduced to an archetype that defines them as bitches and sluts because their positions of power, threaten a Western society's preferred archetype that women are subordinate, gentle, and nurturing. The female guards' crimes are almost considered worse because women are not expected to be violent and so the female guards are labelled as the bitch or the slut in a dehumanizing way. However, this reduces the spectrum of female experiences; women can and have committed atrocities; ordinary women, like the female camp guards of the Holocaust. Although I focus on this case, it is important to recognize that women who challenge gendered expectations and break from preferred archetypes are often restrained by new, negative ones.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS*, Aeteas Filmproduktions, October 1975 (USA), Film. And *The Beast in Heat*, Eterna Film, July 1977 (Italy), Film.

<sup>3</sup> *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, Bethesda, 2014, Video Game. And *Wolfenstein: The Old Blood*, Bethesda, 2015, Video Game. AND *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*, Bethesda, 2017, Video Game.

<sup>4</sup> David Lindenfield, "Jungian Archetypes and the Discourse of History", *Rethinking History*, no.2, vol.13, June 2009, 217.

## Methodology

The “Female Nazi” is a term I will be using throughout the paper to disassociate the image created as a memory ideal from the actual *Aufseherinnen*. The “Female Nazi” is an archetype I have identified in contemporary media to describe a woman entrenched in the Reich system. The “Female Nazi” archetype is a combination of the bitch and slut archetypes seen across literature, film, media and video games. The bitch is controlling, selfish, and devious. However, it is her femaleness that turns her lust for control into a negative characteristic; if she were male, she would be labelled as boss-like.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the term slut is only used to describe women; men are encouraged to express their sexuality where women’s sex is shunned by patriarchal societies.<sup>6</sup> It is important to separate the “Female Nazi” and the *Aufseherinnen* because the archetype is restrictive whereas the *Aufseherinnen* were much more complex than they have been represented. To label all the *Aufseherinnen* under one image limits the causes for their atrocities under one factor; themselves. In reality, these women were complex, from all sorts of backgrounds; they came to work at the camps for different reasons and experienced the camp in various ways. Put simply, the *Aufseherinnen* were not monsters, but ordinary women. What actually occurred in the camps contrast heavily with what is portrayed in contemporary media because the *Aufseherinnen* were restrained by the male gaze to objects of desire and means for pleasure.

The archetypal “Female Nazi” is a woman, usually with Aryan features, who holds power over a group of victims and is hyper-sexualized and differentiated from others by her sex. *Aufseherinnen* were SS auxiliaries whose gender being associated with their actions created an ahistorical image of them where they have become objects of desire rather than subjects of inquiry in a way that their male

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Appleton Aguiar, *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature*, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), 50.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

colleagues have not. The “Female Nazi” embodies the fascination of the Holocaust that society is experiencing. However, these women were complex, real people, and generalizing them into one sexualized image highlights how Western society views women in power, women with an active sexuality, and women in general.

There are many pitfalls I have had to navigate in my research which I feel are important to add here to understand why I use specific sources as evidence. Criminals rarely write descriptions of their crimes, and this is the case for the *Aufseherinnen* and so, one could never get at the feelings and thought-processes of the female camp guards. However, there are transcripts of statements and testimony from women like Grese, Bormann and Volkenrath from the Bergen-Belsen trials. The way that questions are answered or dodged speaks to how these three women wanted to be represented and in most cases, it adheres to a victim archetype. However, it is not the aim of this paper to get at the thought process of the *Aufseherinnen*. I am using survivors’ stories, a male SS memoir, newspapers, tabloids, film and video games to analyze the memory idealization created around these women and how it has fallen and been cemented into this archetype. Gendered identifications were constantly present in descriptions of the *Aufseherinnen*. It is when the trials are broadcasted in newspapers that the public eroticizes the image and the “Female Nazi” that conjures into our minds today is created.

Although they could not be aware of the “Nazi Female” archetype since its’ fruition would not be until after their executions, I argue that the *Aufseherinnen* responses that limit their violence and positions in the concentration camps show that they are trying to align themselves with the preferred archetypes for women. The only time we hear from some of the *Aufseherinnen* is during the Bergen-Belsen trials of 1945. Women like Irma Grese, Juana Bormann, and Eliza Volkenrath are tried, cross

examined and sentenced to death in the Bergen-Belsen trials.<sup>7</sup> During the trials, each of these women present themselves in a careful way. Grese, Bormann, and Volkenrath admit or deny very specific lines of questioning regarding their involvement in violence or positions inside Auschwitz and its' satellite camps. They maneuver the trials to align themselves with the preferred archetype of the mother or victim. The newspapers paint a different picture. The image of the *Aufseherinnen* comes to the world stage when the trials for their crimes is broadcasted in newspapers. Multiple articles articulate the women's crimes with much focus on their gender, sometimes more so than their actual criminal activity. During the progress of the trials, Irma Grese was broadcasted as some-what of a star; New York Times articles from 1945 focus on her and her 'blondenness' more than any other person in the trials, including Josef Kramer.<sup>8</sup>

Two memoirs from women survivors, one from Auschwitz – *Five Chimneys* by Olga Lengyel, the other from Ravensbruck – *Ravensbruck* by Germain Tillion, discuss encounters with female concentration camp guards. These survivor memoirs are among the closest sources we, as historians, can use to be familiar with the *Aufseherinnen* experience in the camps since the *Aufseherinnen*, like most who commit crimes, did not write about their experiences. Another source is the memoir of Kommandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Hoss, who worked beside these women and claimed to sympathize with them in his memoir, *Death Dealer*. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, production of Nazi exploitation films, like *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS*, explodes, constructing an extreme archetype and

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<sup>7</sup> The United Nations War Crimes Commission, *The Belsen Trial: Trial of Josef Kramer and 44 Others*, (Luneburg: British Military Court, 1945).

<sup>8</sup> Associated Press, "Kramer and Irma Grese Will Die With 9 Others for Reich Murders", *New York Times*, November 18, 1945, Accessed October 5, 2017, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1945/11/18/109347589.html?pageNumber=1>.

cementing “Female Nazis” as objects of desire. The “Female Nazi” lives on today in tabloids that fetishize this history and in video games where they are casted as main antagonists.<sup>9</sup>

### **Review of Literature:**

In the late 1980’s German intellectuals struggled with how to remember the Holocaust and the Nazi past. The “Historians Quarrel” or “*Historikerstreit*” was a clash between historians that largely dealt with how Germany could uphold its’ nationalist pride after its former government committed one of the largest crimes against humanity.<sup>10</sup> As *Historikerstreit* largely left out women’s voices and women’s histories, a female *Historikerstreit* arose in quick succession and focused on whether German women were active participants or victims in Nazi society. Two historians took the helm to represent each side of the debate. Gisela Bock wrote “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany” about how Nazi programs, such as forced sterilization, made women helpless in defending themselves against the anti-woman Reich.<sup>11</sup> In this history told by Bock, women are reduced to a damsel or victim archetype, manipulated by the whim of the Reich into doing things they did not want to do.<sup>12</sup> This stance takes away the agency of women in the Reich and places women in the Reich into a victim archetype. Although Bock is not placing women into the “Female Nazi” archetype that I have identified, her placement similarly reduces women’s spectrum of experiences. My argument, that women maneuvered the system to escape archetypes that reduced their choices is better reflected in Claudia Koonz’s *Mothers in the Fatherland*. Koonz argued that the

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<sup>9</sup> Helm. *AND Wolfenstein: The New Order*, Bethesda, 2014, Video Game.

<sup>10</sup> Susannah Heschel, “Does Atrocity Have a Gender? Women in the SS” *Lessons and Legacies*, (2004), 301-302.

<sup>11</sup> Gisela Bock, “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization, and the State,” *Signs* 8, no.3, (1983), 400-21.

<sup>12</sup> Aguiar, 109.

Nazi Party gave women opportunities to climb new social ladders.<sup>13</sup> Before this debate, hardly anyone acknowledged the role of women in Reich society. However, Koonz and Bock still do not devote much research to the *Aufseherinnen*. Although these two historians' texts serve as a frame in which to place the *Aufseherinnen* in the Reich, other sources are needed to delve deeper into the specific image of women in "the killing fields".

Wendy Lower, a consultant to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, addressed the gap in 2013 with *Hitler's Furies* by placing 500,000 German women in those killing fields.<sup>14</sup> Lower focuses less on camp women and more on the wives of Nazi men. These were nothing like the victims described by Bock. Lower's findings prove that genocide was not just "men's work" in Nazi Germany.<sup>15</sup> Although Lower's work is closely associated with my argument as we both agree that women can and did commit atrocities, contradictory to the popular archetype of women as docile, she avoids the topic of *Aufseherinnen*. Lower explained that she wanted her work to focus on women, such as SS wives, who were not working in camps yet still participated in violent and fatal acts, even in mass killings.<sup>16</sup> By looking at camp women specifically, I will fill the gap that Lower avoided. Her work is valuable for information on how indoctrinated women were and what was expected of women in Nazi Germany generally. Although Lower discusses wives in-depth, she only mentions *Aufseherinnen* briefly. *Aufseherinnen* and SS wives both lived under the same Reich expectations but then transcended them through violence; therefore, their experiences were not all that different, just

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<sup>13</sup> Claudia Koonz, *Mothers of the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Lower, 15-16.

<sup>15</sup> Katrina von Kellenbach, "God's Love and Women's Love: Prison Chaplains Counsel the Wives of Nazi Perpetrators," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no.2 (2004): 7-24.

<sup>16</sup> Lower, 132-34.

one has inspired the “Female Nazi” archetype. I argue that it is the employed women, the *Aufseherinnen* since an important feature of the “Female Nazi” is her presence in camps, her power over prisoners and her formal rank that sometimes placed her above men.

Archetypes have been widely used in the literary field to analyze a piece of literature and its characters. Archetypes offer a way to analyze actors in the real world and place them in archetypes in an attempt to make sense of reality; a dangerous tendency, especially for historians. In *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature*, Sarah Appleton Aguiar outlines how women in literature are confined to specific archetypes such as the mother, the victim, the bitch, and the slut.<sup>17</sup> Aguiar’s definitions of archetypes are useful as they are reflected in the contemporary sources that depict the “Female Nazi”. As those who lived through this event begin to disappear, we are faced with the perceived task of having to make sense of one of the most horrific crimes against humanity and a way to do this is by simplifying a person into a stereotype rather than an ordinary person with complex motives and reasoning. Using second-hand knowledge, as one is forced to do when looking at the lack of source material from the women themselves, patriarchal societies place gendered assumptions on female perpetrators and place them in archetypal boxes. These assumptions arise from gendered expectations and ideals of a patriarchal Western society and create the “Female Nazi” image.

After “Departures: New Feminist Perspectives on the Holocaust”, a women’s Holocaust conference held in 2001, Karyn Ball, attendee and professor of English and Film studies at Alberta University, was troubled with the idea that survivors will soon be gone and that “post-memory” will have to dominate the historic field. “Post-memory”, according to Ball, is the attempt to take the Holocaust victim experiences and make them one’s own. An attempt – because this is an impossible task. Sympathy is an important, perhaps even mandatory, part of Holocaust studies that allows people

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<sup>17</sup> Aguiar, 11-15.



to interact with the history on a personal and healing level.<sup>18</sup> However, there is danger in interjecting one's own feelings into the history, when, in fact, those feelings could have been completely absent, as the Holocaust is an unpredictable and complicated past. After hearing about an event, it is natural for a person to interject their own lived experiences and their exposure to film, news and other sources to create what it must have been like.<sup>19</sup> A second-hand account is likely to place historical actors in archetypal boxes, in this case, the "Female Nazi" archetype and an ahistorical image is shown in contemporary media. In her article, "Unspeakable Differences, Obscene Pleasures: The Holocaust as an Object of Desire", Ball discusses mostly the victims, and how second-hand accounts could misinterpret their histories. I believe the same issue is occurring with *Aufseherinnen*. The formation of memory idealization connects what actually happened – as told by the women themselves, pictures of them and accounts told of the camps – to second-hand accounts such as newspapers, film and video games who represent the women as the "Female Nazi" archetype as a direct result of breaking away from more preferred archetypes that restrict women to docile roles.

### Historical Context

Under Hitler, the women of Germany became second-class citizens and were restricted to the three K's; *Kinder, Kirche, Küche* (Children, Church, Kitchen).<sup>20</sup> A woman's duty was, according to Reich Minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, to "[be beautiful and [bring] children into the world... The female bird preens herself for her mate and hatches her eggs for him."<sup>21</sup> The Reich was setting

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<sup>18</sup> Karyn Ball, "Unspeakable Differences, Obscene Pleasures: The Holocaust as an Object of Desire", *Women in German Yearbook*, vol. 19, (2003) 25-26.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 35

<sup>20</sup> Grunberger, 252.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Goebbels, *Michael: Ein Deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblättern*, (Franz Eher, Munich: 1934), 41.

expectations for women to fall into the caring and nurturing mother archetype.<sup>22</sup> The camps, however, were a place where women were encouraged to utilize skills they may have acquired participating in Nazi women's organizations, such as The Nazi Women's League, the Nazi Party Women's Organization, or the League of German Girls.<sup>23</sup> Women did not necessarily have to be Nazi party members to join, but used these women's groups to get a foot in the door of, what was considered, elite society in the Reich. Inside, women were indoctrinated in traditional Prussian militarism with paramilitary training.<sup>24</sup> Womanhood and the mother archetype was thus widened for women in the Reich to take part in defending *Kinder, Kirche* and *Kirche* and employment in concentration camps was an attractive option.

Militarization opened the door for women to join the ranks of the *Schutzstaffel Totenkopfverbände* (SS-TV), the SS division in charge of concentration camp administration. Hardly anywhere else in the Reich were women working alongside men or were in superior positions to men.<sup>25</sup> The Reich appropriated allowing women into high ranking positions due to tendencies that allocated women troubles to women themselves; women doctors served women patients, women judges ruled on domestic cases, and in camps, women guards were to control women prisoners.<sup>26</sup> The women guards were trained at Ravensbruck, the all-women camp, and then were placed in other camps with female prisoners.<sup>27</sup> By the end of the war, there were between 3,000 and 4,000 women working as guards in

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<sup>22</sup> Aguiar, 28.

<sup>23</sup> Lower, 21-25. And Grunberger, 257.

<sup>24</sup> Lower, 25.

<sup>25</sup> Grunberger, 259.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Lower, 21.

the Nazi concentration camp system; about 1/10 of total camp personnel.<sup>28</sup> Many of these women sought employment at the camp because it was one of the few places in the Reich system where women could hold authoritative positions and the pay was good.<sup>29</sup> These women worked as SS auxiliaries and their duties ranged from communication to mass murder. The preferred mother archetype in the Reich was expanded due to necessity during war times to include a more militaristic type of protection of the family, but still falls under motherly duties. It is when women move up in ranks and are tasked with equal or superior duties, like in the concentration camps as *Aufseherinnen* or *Oberaufseherinnen* (Superior female guard), that they are labeled as bitches and later, sluts.

### The Bitch

The “Female Nazi” is often presented as commanding, domineering and malicious – a bitch. The word is often associated with a woman in power, but for now we will focus on the merciless aspect endowed upon this archetype. The word “bitch” is used to describe many of the real *Aufseherinnen* and became a key tenant to the image in memory ideal. Dorothy Binz was the “beautiful bitch”, Irma Grese was the “Bitch of Belsen” and Isle Koch was the “Bitch of Buchenwald”.<sup>30</sup> In recent portrayals of *Aufseherinnen*, the female antagonists’ behaviors are ruthless. In *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, Frau Irene Engel’s last words to the protagonist are a grisly threat, “Your skin charred and your fats rendered. Your kind exterminated. In the end, I will feed your flesh... to the furnace”.<sup>31</sup> In the

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<sup>28</sup> Lower, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Wendy Lower, 21. And Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbruck*, Trans. Gerald Satterwhite, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973) 67.

<sup>30</sup> It is difficult to discern whether these names were concocted in camps by prisoners or by journalist who were reporting on activities in the camps during the women’s trials.

<sup>31</sup> *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, May 2, 2014, Bethesda, Video Game.

film from 1975, *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS*, Ilsa destroys almost every prisoner she encounters, torturing the victims to death.<sup>32</sup> *The Beast in Heat* has a similar sadist plot with a female lead.<sup>33</sup> The titles to these two films is in literal reference to the word bitch, meaning a female dog in heat. The origin of cruelty in the memory ideal is, perhaps, the easiest to identify because survivors have come forth with stories of their survival inside the concentration camps and which subsequently became broadcasted in papers during the women's trials.

Survivor, Germaine Tillion, recalls Dorothy Binz, first assistant to the *Oberaufseherin* at Ravensbruck, beating a prisoner mercilessly and as the woman laid unconscious, Binz stepped on the body and balanced there for an excruciating moment until she walked away, boots bloodied.<sup>34</sup> Another survivor, Olga Lengyel, describes the infamous Dr. Mengele and Joseph Kramer, and says neither one compared to Irma Grese who harbored, "the most violent hatred [she] ever experienced".<sup>35</sup> In The New York Times article, "Belsen tortures by Woman Listed" of September 27, 1945, Irma Grese's brutalities and murders were broadcasted to the world.<sup>36</sup> With descriptions like these, it is understood where the vicious characteristic seen in today's "Female Nazis" derived from. Although these women *did* participate in violent acts, labeling them as a bitch not only reduces the *Aufseherin* and their history, it reduces the violence. Rather than focusing on the act, patriarchal societies focus on the female

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<sup>32</sup> *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS*, Aeteas Filmproduktions, October 1975 (USA), Film.

<sup>33</sup> *The Beast in Heat*, Eterna Film, July 1977 (Italy), Film.

<sup>34</sup> Tillion, 69.

<sup>35</sup> Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz*, Translated by Clifford Coch and Paul Weiss, (Chicago: Ziff Davis, 1947) 147.

<sup>36</sup> Associated Press. "Belsen Tortures By Woman Listed". *New York Times*. September 27, 1945. Accessed October 5, 2017.  
<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1945/09/27/305505542.html?pageNumber=12>.

guards perceived negative femininity. The women were aware, during the trials, how certain acts could get them labeled as the malicious bitch archetype which could spell out their punishments and so they were careful about how they describe their actions in the camps.

During the Bergen-Belsen trial, Irma Grese, Juana Bormann and Elizabeth Volkenrath all maneuver questions about their violence in similar ways. None of them admit to committing murder and none admit to “savage” beatings but they do admit to hitting prisoners. They each deny the numerous accusations that came before their testimonies, claiming that each witness must be a liar.<sup>37</sup> This is important because these women were aware that downplaying their violence and aligning themselves with more acceptable female archetypes gave them a better chance for more lenient charges. Irma Grese downplays often as she admits to hitting prisoners, but never hard enough that any of them fell to the ground; even if she hit them with her whip.<sup>38</sup> This is all after countless testimony from survivors of her murdering and beating prisoners. Bormann, who was known for setting her dog on people, denies she ever did, suggesting that the several survivors who testified that she had must have mistaken her for a different *Aufseherin*.<sup>39</sup> In fact, they testify in a way to make themselves more in line with the victim archetype. Irma Grese and Elizabeth Volkenrath say that they never wanted to be in the camps and often tried to leave but were denied by the Reich labor courts.<sup>40</sup> To be representing themselves as victims of the system rather than willing participants is in line with Bock’s theory.

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<sup>37</sup> The United Nations War Crimes Commission, *The Belsen Trial: Trial of Josef Kramer and 44 Others*, (Lüneburg: British Military Court, 1945).

<sup>38</sup> Irma Grese, The United Nations War Crimes Commission, *The Belsen Trial: Trial of Josef Kramer and 44 Others*, (Lüneburg: British Military Court, 1945).

<sup>39</sup> Juana Bormann, The United Nations War Crimes Commission, *The Belsen Trial: Trial of Josef Kramer and 44 Others*, (Lüneburg: British Military Court, 1945).

<sup>40</sup> Irma Grese, The United Nations War Crimes Commission, *The Belsen Trial: Trial of Josef Kramer and 44 Others*, (Lüneburg: British Military Court, 1945). And Elizabeth Volkenrath, The United Nations War Crimes Commission, *The Belsen Trial: Trial of Josef Kramer and 44 Others*, (Lüneburg: British Military Court, 1945).

Not all of the *Aufseherinnen* were ecstatic about their positions in the camps as the “Female Nazi” archetype would lead people into believing. Some women, like Grese and Volkenrath did not apply for the job, but were drafted to serve there for a compulsory job detail.<sup>41</sup> Kommandant Hoss claimed to sympathize with the *Aufseherinnen*, claiming that many had come to him and his wife for moral consolation.<sup>42</sup> In her memoir, Tillion mentions other prisoners talking about an unusual *Aufseherin* who had once worked at Ravensbruck. She cried frequently, having never been able to adapt to her settings, and left. Tillion reports that she had never heard of another case like this one, as guards were usually quick to learn the “proper camp manners” soon after their arrival.<sup>43</sup> Some prisoners in Ravensbruck concocted a game from this concept and made bets on how long a novice camp guard took to “win her stripes” or to conform to the regular subjugation of prisoners. Some women took four days, others – a month.<sup>44</sup> Tillion estimates that half of the *Aufseherinnen* visibly enjoyed dealing out beatings; the other half seemed to enact cruelty because it was their job and they were under the scrutiny of their colleagues.<sup>45</sup> To paint all *Aufseherinnen* with the same brush would be misrepresenting their history as human beings and reducing them to a stereotype. It limits the spectrum of women’s experience, not only in the Holocaust, but in many histories, to the male gaze that reduces women to objects of desire instead of true players in history.

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<sup>41</sup> Lower, 24-25. And Rudolf Hoss, *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*, edited by Steven Paskuly, (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1992) 149. And The United Nations War Crimes Commission, *The Belsen Trial: Trial of Josef Kramer and 44 Others*, (Luneburg: British Military Court, 1945).

<sup>42</sup>Rudolf Hoss, *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*, edited by Steven Paskuly, (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1992) 149.

<sup>43</sup> Tillion, 69.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 70.

The bitch is described as unflinching and unafraid of anything, but this definition does not mesh with what happened in the courtrooms where women were being sentenced to life in prison or death. During the trials, the women guards are described being in hysterics. Irma Grese cried during her sister's testimony and again when the death sentences were read.<sup>46</sup> Isle Koch's trial was on hold when she collapsed from a, "...self-induced nervous state".<sup>47</sup> Another woman, Helena Kopper, had to be dragged out of the court room by four military police when she was sentenced to fifteen years, screaming, "Why don't you let me hang?"<sup>48</sup> All of this behavior contrasts with the image of the heartless "bitch" depicted in society's imagination. This is important because it shows a range of emotions that the "Female Nazi" archetype does not attribute to female guards. Fear is not a characteristic of a bitch, they do not flinch and are depicted as "soulless".<sup>49</sup>

However, the term "bitch" includes more characteristics than brutality. Often, the word is used to describe a woman in power and the "Female Nazi" is portrayed as, almost, the ultimate woman in power. Women who exert power are perceived as direct threats to patriarchal realm of economics,

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<sup>46</sup> Associated Press. "Belsen Woman Guard Weeps, Denies Guilt". *New York Times*. October 17, 1945. Accessed October 5, 2017. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1945/10/17/94025331.html?pageNumber=6>. And Associated Press. "Kramer and Irma Grese Will Die With 9 Others for Reich Murders". *New York Times*. November 18, 1945. Accessed October 5, 2017. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1945/11/18/109347589.html?pageNumber=1>.

<sup>47</sup> Associated Press. "Isle Koch Again at Trial", *New York Times*. December 20, 1950, Accessed October 2, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1950/12/30/archives/ilse-koch-again-at-trial.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Associated Press. "Kramer and Irma Grese Will Die With 9 Others for Reich Murders", *New York Times*. November 18, 1945. Accessed October 5, 2017. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1945/11/18/109347589.html?pageNumber=1>.

<sup>49</sup> Aguiar, 50.

politics and sex. In response, they get labelled as “iron maiden”, “ball breaker” or a “castrating bitch”.<sup>50</sup> In the ‘90’s too, a term was coined to demean women who defended women’s rights. The term “Feminazi”, made famous by Rush Limbaugh in 1992, is defined as a determined feminist or a strong-willed woman.<sup>51</sup> The irony, lost on those who use the derogatory term, is that the Nazi party was in strong opposition of feminist movements and “strong-willed woman”.<sup>52</sup> For example, when Johanna Langefeldt oversaw the woman’s camp at Auschwitz, *Kommandant* Rudolf Hoss objected. He claimed incompetence from, not only Langefeldt, but all female guards and tried his best to replace Langefeldt with a man. Against his wishes, Langefeldt was placed as chief of the woman’s camp by Heinrich Himmler. Subsequently, any male SS that was placed under Langefeldt complained to Hoss for, “...which of the officers would subject himself to be placed under the command of a woman?”<sup>53</sup> A woman in a superior position to men was threatening and unusual in the Reich at the time as it breaks away from the preferred docile archetypes. A reaction to the threat of a powerful woman is to label them with gendered differentiation, focusing on their physical appearances and sexual activities, thus eroticizing them and reducing them to objects of desire.

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<sup>50</sup> Laurie A Rudman, et al. *The Social Psychology of Gender*, (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2008), 162.

<sup>51</sup> Rush Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, (Pocket Stars Books, 1993) 55.

<sup>52</sup> Lower, 24.

<sup>53</sup> Hoss, 147-48.



## Sexualizing Nazis

The “Female Nazi” archetype adheres to the Reich’s beauty standards for women; physically fit, blonde with blue eyes – the perfect Aryan woman.<sup>54</sup> In almost every expose film that features the “Female Nazi”, there is at least one woman that fits this description.<sup>55</sup> Irene Engel of the *Wolfenstein* series fits this description as well. However, in *Wolfenstein: The New Colossus*, the player is introduced to Irene’s daughter who, despite her blondeness and other Aryan features, is overweight, thus does not fit into the “Female Nazi” mold. This makes sense because this character later joins the resistance against her mother and the Nazi regime.<sup>56</sup> Even newspapers during the trials sometimes get lost in the women’s looks and only briefly describe the crimes they were being tried for. In the New York Times article from October 6, 1945, “Belsen Girl Guard Blames All of SS”, the article centers around Irma Grese’s looks; mentioning her blondeness, calling her “pretty” and only briefly describes the violent acts she committed.<sup>57</sup> The newspapers reflected what was actually occurring in the trials as even the Colonel that was interviewing her asks Grese about the way she wore her hair in the camps compared to the way she was wearing it in the courtroom and even asks about how another defendant is wearing her hair for no apparent reason.<sup>58</sup> In a Daily Mail article from January 11, 2015, the writer obsesses

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<sup>54</sup> Wendy Lower, 25. And Grunberger, 262.

<sup>55</sup> For more Nazi exploitation films featuring specifically “Female Nazi’s”, see: *Casa Privata per le SS* (1977), *Deported Women of the SS Special Section* (1976), *Wanda, the Wicked Warden* (1977), *Jailhouse Wardress* (1979), *Iron Sky* (2012).

<sup>56</sup> *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*, Bethesda, 2017, Video Game.

<sup>57</sup> Associated Press. “Belsen Girl Guard Blames All of SS”. *New York Times*. October 6, 1945. Accessed October 5, 2017. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1945/10/06/95795297.html?pagenumber=7>.

<sup>58</sup> Colonel Backhouse, The United Nations War Crimes Commission, *The Belsen Trial: Trial of Josef Kramer and 44 Others*, (Lunenburg: British Military Court, 1945).

over the idea that “pretty female guards with fashionable hair would release dogs on inmates” or that “Many were blonde and beautiful...”.<sup>59</sup> Society, in analyzing what happened in concentration camps, focuses heavily on the attractiveness of female guards. In turn, this escalates into the Nazi exploitation films of the 1980s<sup>60</sup>. Focusing primarily on the films that exploit *Aufseherinnen*, pornography being the end-result of sexualizing the guards and is the most extreme case of the slut archetype that comprises the “Female Nazi”.

Sexual interactions did occur in the camps, but punishment and disgust is reserved for the female guards who participated.<sup>61</sup> In his memoir, Hoss does not hide his abhorrence towards most of female guards. He calls them incompetent, thieving, but the worst thing he claims women could do was to have sexual relationships with male prisoners.<sup>62</sup> Sexual relationships seem to have occurred between women guards with male guards and prisoners of both sexes quite frequently as both Lengyel and Tillion both mention them in their respective memoirs as well. Lengyel says rumors of Irma Grese having sexual relationships with Kramer and Mengele circulated the camp.<sup>63</sup> In fact, Grese admits to “[getting to know somebody,” an engineer who also worked at the camp.<sup>64</sup> Tillion recalls multiple women guards becoming prisoners after being caught.<sup>65</sup> Even Elizabeth Volkenrath admits that

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<sup>59</sup> Helm.

<sup>60</sup> Susannah Heschel, “Does Atrocity Have a Gender? Women in the SS” *Lessons and Legacies*, (2004), 301-302.

<sup>61</sup> Lengyel, 148. And Hoss,149. And Tillion, 70.

<sup>62</sup> Hoss, 149.

<sup>63</sup> Lengyel, 148.

<sup>64</sup> Irma Grese, The United Nations War Crimes Commission, *The Belsen Trial: Trial of Josef Kramer and 44 Others*, (Luneburg: British Military Court, 1945).

<sup>65</sup> Tillion, 70.

fraternizing with prisoners occurred as she tells the story of how an *Aufseherin* had an affair with a male prisoner was punished by being flogged by Volkenrath and other *Aufseherin*.<sup>66</sup> Again, there are no sources of female guards relaying this experience to us nor any of prisoners about affairs with guards. Five sources declaring that relationships occurred inside the camps is substantial, but we have no evidence suggesting why or how these relationships occurred. So, these women were sexually active, but so were their male counterparts who were never labeled as a slut nor do people focus on the male's appearance. Contemporary sources seem to have taken this information and run with it. In *Ilsa*, the "Nazi Female", Ilsa, sleeps with numerous prisoners before destroying them. Sadism is the most common way that these sexual relationships get expressed in the films.<sup>67</sup> Thus, the "Female Nazi" is sexualized, which is different than having sex. To be sexualized is to have the "male gaze" affixed onto a person and reduce them to objects of desire, to sluts.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

The "Female Nazi" arises from popular imaginary as a hypersexualized, malice being based on an ahistorical narrative collected from second-hand interpretations. As historians, we will never understand the *Aufseherinnen* entirely, but we can analyze this imagery and critique its tendency to sexualize these people purely based on their gender. The atrocities that occurred during the Holocaust are unimaginably mind boggling, stranger still, for the Western society that boxes women into docile archetypes, is the fact that the gentle sex had anything to do with it. *Aufseherinnen*'s positions of power get them labeled as "bitches", there is a strong focus on their looks and their sexual lives. The *Aufseherinnen* committed violence and participated in sexual affairs but labelling them as bitches and

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<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Volkenrath, The United Nations War Crimes Commission, *The Belsen Trial: Trial of Josef Kramer and 44 Others*, (Lüneburg: British Military Court, 1945).

<sup>67</sup> *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS*, Aeteas Filmproduktions, October 1975 (USA), Film.

<sup>68</sup> Sarah Appleton Aguiar, *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature*, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001) 45.

sluts slight them for their gender more than their actual crimes and stifles the full spectrum of human experience. Placements like this don't just occur in this case, but in many others where women are strong willed. Women continue to be placed in archetypes when they are threatening the status quo of the patriarchy and their uniqueness is glanced over. The *Aufseherinnen* were average Reich women who saw a chance to escape from the mother archetype that was encouraged in their society and claimed positions where they wielded power. The "Female Nazi" archetype was birthed from a place of insecurity to cope by reducing various women under the male gaze.

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