

“The Soldier’s Wife Who Ran Away with the Russian”: Sexual Infidelities in World War I Germany

Lisa M. Todd

IN May 1917 twenty-seven residents of Landau (Württemberg) sent a long petition to the German Reichstag. The group, which included doctors, pastors, teachers, and industrialists, demanded that the state put an end to the “immoral” behavior of women who had romantic relationships with foreign prisoners of war. The petition included more than one hundred examples of such affairs, gleaned from newspapers, court records, and eyewitness accounts. The petitioners lamented the “sinking morality” of the countryside and the damaged reputation of German women. They also had more immediate concerns. These affairs were threatening the happiness of families, “complicating” the feeding of the nation, weakening the strength of the people, and heightening the fear of espionage. The petitioners went on to warn the Reichstag deputies that “good German citizens are full of anger at such events,” and that the common person’s “sense of sacrifice” was dwindling now, in the third year of the war.¹

The objections of the Landau petitioners notwithstanding, the German civil and military authorities *did* spend a great deal of time policing the sexual activities of Germans, at home and abroad, during World War I. Mobilization for war saw a mass separation of couples that was unprecedented in the history of the German Reich. By the time the last bullet was fired in 1918, eighty-five percent of all eligible German males had served in the army, a staggering 13,123,011. Most of these men were between the ages of twenty and forty, and many were married. By the end of 1915, at least one-third of all German husbands were serving at the front; for the next three years most of these couples would experience long separations.² As the war dragged on and men and women had more of their life experiences separately, fears increased that their relationships would not survive the war. Couples were well aware of the possibilities of infidelity. More surprising in a time of mass privation is that sexual infidelity would come to

¹Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart (HstAS), E130b Bü 3808, Staatsministerium—Kriegsgefangene, insbesondere Fürsorge und Abfindung, 1914–1931, 12 (hereafter Landau Petition).

²Ute Daniel, *The War From Within: German Working-Class Women in the First World War* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1997), 130–131.

occupy the minds of German bureaucrats, social reformers, religious leaders, and medical doctors. They voiced concern that the war experience only exacerbated the downward turn in morality brought on by the country's rapid industrialization. The resulting debates, perpetuating the prewar moral purity movement (*Sittlichkeitsbewegung*), continued in spite of the "domestic truce" of 1914.

In the euphoria of August 1914, many Germans had expressed grandiose ideas about the potential regenerative nature of the coming conflict. There was a feeling that the war would wash away the growing frivolousness (or tedium) of Wilhelmine society and place the postwar nation on a new, higher moral ground. After a few months of war, however, this optimism turned sour. It was replaced by a feeling that the war was changing German society much too rapidly, and that the nation might end up morally worse than before 1914. The tension between hopes for regeneration and fears of degeneration was played out on the public stage, as Germans renegotiated wartime gender roles and sexual relationships.

Myriad "fears" were present in wartime discourses: fear of venereal diseases that threatened the reproductive capabilities of the nation; fear of the disintegration of marriages at a time when the family was being exalted as the bedrock of postwar renewal; fear of falling birthrates when the human cost of war made them most crucial; and fear of war wives cavorting with precisely those foreign male warriors who were killing male Germans in unprecedented numbers. Whereas the discourse of fear was voiced in many forms, at the center of it lay one key concern: sexually active women. Indeed, for many Germans, female promiscuity became one of the worst social consequences of Europe's first "total war."³

In the past two decades, historians have realized that the years 1914–1918 profoundly affected the renegotiation of gender identities in the twentieth century.⁴

³"Total war" remains a contested term. See Roger Chickering, "Militärsgeschichte als Totalgeschichte im Zeitalter des totalen Kriegs," in *Was ist Militärgeschichte?*, ed. Thomas Kühne and Benjamin Ziemann (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000); Roger Chickering, "Total War: The Use and Abuse of the Concept," in *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences*, ed. Manfred M. Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Förster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 13–28; Stig Förster, "Introduction," in *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914–1918*, 1–18, ed. Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴See, for example, Shirley Ardener and Sharon MacDonald, eds., *Images of Women in Peace and War: Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives* (Milwaukee, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Helen M. Cooper et al., eds., *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender, and Literary Representation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Nicole Ann Dombrowski, ed., *Women and War in the Twentieth Century: Enlisted Without Consent* (New York: Garland Press, 1999); Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Women as Mirror and Other: Toward a Theory of Women, War, and Feminism," *Humanities in Society* 5, no. 2 (1982); Karen Hagemann, "Militär, Krieg und Geschlechterverhältnisse. Untersuchungen, Überlegungen und Fragen zur Militärgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit," in *Klio in Uniform? Probleme und Perspektiven einer Modernen Militärgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Ralf Pröve (Cologne: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1997), 35–88; Karen Hagemann, "Venus und Mars. Reflexionen zu einer Geschlechtergeschichte von Militär und Krieg," in *Landsknechte, Soldatenfrauen*

They have well illustrated how gender can act as a societal stabilizer in peacetime and then take on added significance in wartime, as sex roles are reinforced as a way of counteracting the destabilizing effects of armed conflict. In modern wars the discourse of militarism and the system of images, symbols, and rituals celebrating masculinity and the character of the warrior permeate the fabric of society.⁵ Women represent the “Other” in this militarist discourse and have been expected to provide a passive, maternal, and vulnerable counterpoint to the aggressive, bloodthirsty, and courageous warrior male.⁶ In 1914, however, the huge material requirements of total warfare dictated that women become part of the mechanized killing machine, as their labor was harnessed to produce urgently needed armaments.⁷ In addition to their work in factories, women were also required to work as nurses, military auxiliaries, streetcar operators, mail carriers, and fund-raisers.⁸ Red Cross posters even asked women to donate their hair to the

und Nationalkrieger. Militär, Krieg und Geschlechterordnung im Historischen Wandel, ed. Karen Hagemann and Ralf Prüve (Frankfurt am Main and New York: Berg, 1998), 13–48; Christa Hämmerle, “Von den Geschlechtern der Kriege und des Militärs. Forschungseinblicke und Bemerkungen zu einer Neuen Debatte,” in *Was ist Militärgeschichte?*, ed. Kühne and Ziemann, 229–62.

⁵Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 57.

⁶Susan Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). For more on the connections between maternalism and war, see Susan Zieger, “She Didn't Raise Her Boy to be a Slacker: Motherhood, Conscription, and the Culture of World War I,” *Feminist Studies* 22 (1996): 7–39; Birthe Kundrus, *Kriegerfrauen. Familienpolitik und Geschlechterverhältnisse im ersten und zweiten Weltkrieg* (Hamburg: Hans Christians Verlag, 1995); and Nancy Huston, “The Matrix of War: Mothers and Heroes,” in *The Female Body in Western Culture*, ed. Susan Rabin Suleimann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 119–138.

⁷Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War* (London: Routledge, 1981); James McMillan, *Housewife or Harlot: The Place of Women in French Society 1870–1940* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981); Maurine Weiner Greenwald, *Women, War, and Work: The Impact of World War I on Women Workers in the United States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980); Gail Braybon, “Winners or Losers: Women's Symbolic Role in the War Story,” in *Evidence, History, and the Great War: Historians and the Impact of 1914–1918*, ed. Gail Braybon (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2003), 86–112; Miriam Cooke, *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996); Miriam Cooke, “Wo Man, Retelling the War Myth,” in *Gendering War Talk*, ed. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woolcott (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 177–204; Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London: Pandora, 1987); James McMillan, “The Great War and Gender Relations: The Case of French Women and the First World War Revisited,” in *Evidence*, ed. Braybon, 135–153; Margaret Darrow, *French Women and the First World War: War Stories of the Home Front* (Oxford: Berg, 2000).

⁸Bianca Schönberger, “Mobilising *Etappenheldinnen* for Service with the Military: Gender Regimes in First World War Germany” (Ph.D. diss., Oxford University, 2002); and Bianca Schönberger, “Motherly Heroines and Adventurous Girls: Red Cross Nurses and Women Army Auxiliaries in the First World War,” in *Home/Front: The Military, War, and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany*, ed. Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 87–114. See also Jean H. Quataert, “Women's Wartime Service under the Cross: Patriotic Communities in Germany, 1912–1918,” in *Great War, Total War*, ed. Chickering and Förster, 453–483; Margaret Darrow, “French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I,” *American Historical Review* 101, no. 1 (1996): 80–106; Angela Woolcott, *On Her*

cause.⁹ Further complicating gender expectations, trench warfare severely challenged the European preconception of what it meant to be a soldier. Mechanized weapons and battle by attrition meant that soldiers no longer resembled knights on horseback.¹⁰ Increasing numbers of shell-shocked and “neurotic” men called into question the indisputable bravery of the soldier.¹¹ Many Europeans found it difficult to reconcile the memory of the heroic male with the highly visible presence of so many disabled veterans on their streets.¹² In spite of the fact that the day-to-day realities of war had fundamentally changed, the posters and pamphlet literature of World War I propagandists hearkened back to medieval images of male chivalry and female vulnerability.¹³ This is just one example of how constructions of gendered identity were not always in sync with the day-to-day lived experiences of men and women.

To pose new questions about the links between discursive and lived gender dichotomies in the early twentieth century, the following analysis focuses on the phenomenon of German women who entered into romantic relationships

Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994); Barbara Guttman, *Weibliche Heimmee. Frauen in Deutschland, 1914–1918* (Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1989); and Stefan Baujohr, *Die Hälfte der Fabrik. Geschichte der Frauenarbeit in Deutschland, 1914–1945* (Marburg: Leske and Budrich, 1979).

⁹*Frauen und Mädchen!*, Imperial War Museum First World War Poster Collection, London (UK), Number 0434.

¹⁰Indeed, Paul Fussell has dubbed the land of the front lines the “troglydyte world.” Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 36–74.

¹¹Elaine Showalter, “Rivers and Sassoon: The Inscription of Male Gender Anxieties,” in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, ed. Margaret Higonnet, Margaret Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, and Margaret Collins (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 61–69; Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (London: Virago Press, 1987); and Paul Lerner, “Hysterical Cures: Hypnosis, Gender, and Performance in World War I and Weimar Germany,” *History Workshop Journal* 45 (1998): 79–101.

¹²Sabine Kienitz, “Body Damage: War Disability and Constructions of Masculinity in Weimar Germany,” in *Home/Front*, ed. Hagemann and Schüler-Springorum, 181–204; Robert Weldon Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War, 1914–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914–1939* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men’s Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996); Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Post-War France, 1917–1927* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Post-War Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). On the postwar “reconstruction” of gender, see also Stephen Garton, “Return Home: War, Masculinity, and Repatriation,” in *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lakes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 191–204; Daniel J. Sherman, “Monuments, Mourning, and Masculinity in France after World War One,” *Gender and History* 8, no. 1 (1996): 82–107; and Elisabeth Domansky, “Militarization and Reproduction in World War I Germany,” in *Society, Culture, and the State in Germany, 1870–1930*, ed. Geoff Eley (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 427–463, here 428.

¹³See Lisa M. Todd, “An Invitation to Manliness: The Chivalric Representation of Warfare in Germany, France, and Britain, 1914–1918” (M.A. thesis, Royal Holloway College, University of London, 1998).

with foreign prisoners of war. First I consider the dilemma faced by bureaucrats in the War Ministry: prisoner labor was needed in agriculture and industry, even though this put enemy men in close proximity to German women. Second, I examine numerous examples of court cases, in which relationships between German women and foreign prisoners were treated as “crimes,” for which hundreds of women were prosecuted. I then use the example of the “press pillory” to illustrate the myriad ways wartime journalists presented sexual scandals to a captive wartime audience, and argue that this discourse on adulterous war wives played a large role in shaping public opinion of women’s wartime service to their nation. As this article will illustrate, Germans were not united in the fight against wartime immorality: some understood that society was changing and that men’s and women’s lives were becoming increasingly complicated as the war dragged on. I then conclude by illustrating that commentary on wartime infidelity continued past 1918, became wrapped up in the language of degeneration, and even influenced National Socialist policy in World War II. Gender was a key component in how Germans understood and voiced their feelings on change in this tumultuous period. And, as we shall see, the war years created a unique opportunity for the German state to control the private lives of its citizens, and for citizens in turn to control each other.

“Germans Are Stunned in an Undignified Daze”

Civil and military authorities were shocked when the first transports of foreign prisoners of war to their soil provoked not fear or disgust, but interest and excitement among segments of the population.¹⁴ Many Germans turned out to greet the prisoner transport trains returning from the front, often rushing forward to present the enemy soldiers with gifts of flowers, postcards, cigarettes, and even money.¹⁵ Most notable was the considerable attention paid to these foreign men by “shameful” women, who were acting in a “base and un-German manner,” in the words of one War Ministry official.¹⁶ Even female nurses had to be forbidden from speaking to prisoners on anything other than “necessary”

¹⁴For a recent study on the prisoner of war “problem” in World War I Germany, see Uta Hinz, *Gefangen im Großen Krieg. Kriegsgefangenschaft in Deutschland, 1914–1921* (Essen: Klartext-Verlags, 2006).

¹⁵See, for instance, Commander General Tann, “Bekanntmachung,” September 4, 1914. Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Abteilung IV—Kriegsarchiv (KAM), Stv. Gen. Kdo I.b.A.K. 985—Verkehr mit Kriegsgefangenen, 1915–1918, unfoliated, and “An den Pranger,” *D I Tageszeitung* 223 (May 3, 1915). Clipping in Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfeld (BAB), R8034II. 7657, Reichslandbund—Pressarchiv, Kriegs- und Zivilgefangene, 114.

¹⁶Bavarian War Ministry to the Reich Ministry of the Interior, August 1914. BAB R1501. 112386, Ministerium des Innern, Polizeiwesen, Kriegsgefangenen, August 14, 1914–May 12, 1915, 108; Bavarian War Ministry to Acting General Commanders of the First, Second, and Third Army Corps and District Inspectors, August 19, 1914. BAB R1501. 112386, 108.

medical matters.¹⁷ The *Frankfurter Zeitung* reported that two trains pulled into a railway station at the same time—one carrying German soldiers to the front, the other transporting French prisoners of war (POWs) to a nearby camp. The German men were singing “*Wacht am Rhein*,” which prompted the “blonde” wife of a pastor to call out that the soldiers should stop singing, out of consideration for the prisoners.¹⁸ A railway employee wrote of such scenes to his colleagues, “German women and girls have been temporarily stunned into an undignified daze by the prisoner of war transports. Railway commanders intervene with harsh measures, so that our national honor will not be sullied by such elements.”¹⁹ Local officials threatened women “who push[ed] too closely toward the prisoners in an undignified way” with arrest and publication of their names in local newspapers, while others diverted troops from the fighting front to stand between foreign prisoners and local women on the home front.²⁰ Hence, even in the early days of the war, military authorities had to devote precious resources to keeping foreign prisoners and local citizens physically separated.

Monitoring and restricting contact between foreign men and local women was further complicated when they began sharing workplaces, and in some cases, living quarters. The unprecedented number of foreign POWs working in German industry and agriculture sent lawmakers scrambling to find ways to keep Germans at a safe distance from the enemy. In four years of combat, the German army took some 2.5 million prisoners of war.²¹ These men, from all fighting fronts, were housed in more than 130 prisoner of war camps throughout the Reich. Although restricted in their options by the Hague Convention on warfare, the authorities saw this massive group as a potential labor pool to take the place of the German men who had been called up for military service. As a result, Germans employed increasing numbers of prisoners in industry and agriculture after April 1915.²² Though the presence of so many foreign men did prompt concerns for the safety of civilians, many Germans increasingly took

¹⁷Royal General Director of the State Railway System, Stuttgart, Directive to Area Inspectors, August 28, 1914. BAB R1501. 112386, 114.

¹⁸*Frankfurter Zeitung*, cited in Magnus Hirschfeld, *The Sexual History of the World War* (New York: Cadillac Publishing, 1946) and in Bruno Grabinski, *Weltkriege und Sittlichkeit. Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte der Weltkriegsjahre* (Hildesheim: Borgmeyer, 1917).

¹⁹Cited in untitled article, *Sexual-Probleme. Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft und Sexualpolitik* 9 (1914): 617–620.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹In August 1914 there were already 1.2 million foreign workers within the borders of the Reich, including 430,000 migrant workers who had arrived for the 1914 harvest and who were detained by order of the Prussian Ministry of War for the duration of the war. Avner Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 62; Ulrich Herbert, *A History of Foreign Labor in Germany, 1880–1980: Seasonal Workers/Forced Labor/Guest Workers* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 87, 89, 93.

²²Herbert, *History of Foreign Labor*, 90.

the view of one woman's magazine: "our enemy will save us from going hungry."²³

At the same time, the task of running a family farm fell to many German women during the war years. Though most of these women had considerable experience in farm life before their husbands, brothers, and fathers left for war, women were now often in charge of the day-to-day functioning of the farms, for instance, with control over hirings and firings.²⁴ In February 1917, the military command in Karlsruhe estimated that women operated eighty percent of all farms in that area.²⁵ Many Germans accepted the fact that foreign labor was urgently needed to maintain wartime agricultural production.

By the end of 1915, military authorities began to focus their attention more intently on the increasing number of relationships between local women and foreign prisoners. Many officials felt that some of the male prisoners were becoming too comfortable in their new surroundings and were taking their role as "Ersatz" husbands too seriously. The Prussian War Ministry acknowledged the "great moral danger" caused by drafting male prisoners to work alongside women, especially in agricultural areas. Yet it also observed that if the prisoners were removed from the agricultural areas, their "masculine strength and expertise" would go with them. Replacements would have to be found; if not, women would lose their valuable labor, perhaps leaving women unable to manage their farms effectively. This in turn could only worsen the food crisis threatening the German nation.²⁶ Accordingly, military and civil authorities were forced to admit that prisoner labor could not be avoided.

Bureaucrats at more than one tier of government pointed out the obvious problem of billeting prisoners in the homes of women with whom they were forbidden contact. Housing the men in closed barracks seemed an initial solution to the problem; however, wartime budgets and manpower allowed little leeway for extra building projects on the home front.²⁷ And, as we shall see, separate lodgings also failed to ensure separate sleeping arrangements. A Protestant archbishop in Freiburg proposed a regular rotation of prisoners between places of employment. In his view, prisoners who worked with the same family for years at a time became

²³Frau von Mühlfeld, "Unsere Kriegsgefangenen als Landwirtschaftliche Arbeiter," *Die Gutsfrau. Halbmonatsschrift für die Gebildeten Frauen auf dem Lande* 4, no. 5 (1915): 81–83, here 82.

²⁴For instance, forty percent of Bavaria's 1.5 million employed women worked in agriculture. More than twenty percent of these women ran their own farms. Bayerisches Statistisches Landesamt, *Statistisches Jahrbuch für den Freistaat Bayern 1919* (Munich: J. Lindauersche Universitäts-Buchhandlung, 1919), 35.

²⁵Richard Bessel, "Mobilizing German Society for War," in *Great War, Total War*, ed. Chickering and Förster, 437–452, here 442.

²⁶Prussian War Ministry to various General Commanders and local governments, June 25, 1917. BAB R1501.112388, Ministerium des Innern, Polizeiwesen, Kriegsgefangen, September 3, 1916–October 31, 1917, 299–300.

²⁷*Ibid.*

too well acquainted with their surroundings. He also suggested a rotation of guards and watchmen, whom he felt could become “too familiar” with the local population and hence would likely find it difficult to report to police the people they had come to know so well.²⁸

Such plans were implemented on a local basis; however, the military authorities decided that the most effective way to curb illicit sexual relationships was to make them illegal. From a legal perspective, this was a relatively straightforward process. With arguments that pointed out the dangers of espionage; diseases such as lice, typhus, and cholera; and escaped prisoners, military authorities in many districts began introducing regulations based on the Prussian Siege Law of 1851, which curtailed contact between civilians and prisoners.²⁹ The authorities placed notices in local newspapers and constructed warning signs to remind Germans that unnecessary contact between civilians and prisoners could be punishable by fines or imprisonment.³⁰ Thus in February 1915 the General Commander of the First Bavarian Army Corps warned that the following activities could be punishable by up to one year’s imprisonment: meeting with a prisoner, helping to set up meetings between unauthorized civilians and prisoners, giving gifts of any kind to the prisoners, or helping prisoners escape from either their place of work or the prison camp.³¹ Likewise, the Chief Army Commander in the Mark Brandenburg reminded the readers of the *Berliner Tageblatt* in August 1915 that persons could be punished under Sections 120, 121, and 257 of the Reich Criminal Code for providing working POWs with food, money, clothing, or items that “could help facilitate an escape.”³²

Over the course of the war, thousands of women were arrested as a result of their relationships with foreign prisoners. In some cases they were made to pay fines, while others received jail sentences that ranged from one week to one year.³³ Even relationships that did not involve sexual activity fell under the rubric of these new laws. Women were arrested for flirting, writing letters, and

²⁸ Archbishop Schenk, Freiburg, to the Baden Ministry of Culture and Information, January 18, 1918. BAB R15021. 112388, 371.

²⁹ J. A. von Burkersroda and the town council of Niederbarnim to the local district police headquarters, September 8, 1915. Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB), A Rep. 49-04-01- Amtsverwaltung Niederschönhausen, Pankow, Nr. 3—Beschäftigung v. Kriegsgefangenen in Niederschönhausen, 1915–1916, 5.

³⁰ American Thomas Curtin noted such a sign in a travel memoir of wartime Germany: “All Communication between the Civilian Population and Prisoners of War is Strongly Forbidden!” Thomas D. Curtin, *The Land of Deepening Shadow: Germany at War* (London and New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1917), 252.

³¹ General Acting Commander of the First Bavarian Army to various municipal councils, February 25, 1915. KAM, Stv.Gen.Kdo.Ib.A.K 985.

³² “Warnung vor Begünstigung von Kriegsgefangenen,” *Berliner Tageblatt* 434, August 26, 1915, in BAB R8034II.7658, 141.

³³ The “newlywed” servant girl Frieda Jung, for instance, was sentenced to two months for her relationships with two Russian POWs. Kaiserslautern Local Court, August 9, 1916, as cited in the Landau Petition. The single saleswoman Margarete B. was sentenced to four months for engaging

other relatively innocent “misdeeds.”³⁴ The acting magistrate in Bischofswerda (Saxony) sentenced two young girls to ten days’ imprisonment for flirting with imprisoned French officers.³⁵ Three working-class women were sentenced to eight months each for exchanging letters with the prisoners they met while at their factory job in Nuremberg.³⁶ Anna T. made the acquaintance of the French civilian prisoner Fortune G. in a local pub. Witnesses observed that they were friendly and often drank out of the same glass of beer, but that the relationship never moved beyond a casual pub acquaintance. According to Anna T.’s testimony, even before she realized who the man was, she had been reported to the authorities for breaking the law in accordance with the new war ordinances. The public prosecutor subsequently sentenced her to two weeks’ imprisonment for this “crime.”³⁷

Women were also sentenced to jail time for becoming pregnant as a result of their liaisons. Maria Volz, the twenty-three-year-old daughter of “very well-known” parents in Hörstein (Bavaria), had an affair with an imprisoned Englishman and subsequently gave birth to a daughter. She was sentenced to six months’ imprisonment.³⁸ In Dudenhofen (Hessen), a “previously honest and withdrawn” teacher was sentenced to two weeks for her impregnation by a Russian.³⁹ Anastasia Lorrang, mother of four children between the ages of three and ten, and wife to a man who had been at the front for a year and a half, was sentenced to four months in jail for becoming impregnated by a Russian.⁴⁰ Likewise, the day laborer Katharina Brehm’s husband had been at the front for fourteen months when she was arrested for being pregnant by a Frenchman.⁴¹

In many of the convictions handed down by judges across the Reich, sentences were determined according to the “immoral extent” of the “crime.” Twenty-one-year-old Helene Rockert appeared before the Glogau (Lower Silesia) court to answer charges that she had exchanged letters with a Russian prisoner in the Spottauer prison camp. In these letters, the prisoner sent declarations of love and even a marriage proposal. Rockert, the court heard, had already once

in an “intimate” relationship with a French prisoner. “4 Monate Gefängnis für eine Verkäuferin,” *Würzburger Generalanzeiger*, July 26, 1916, as cited in Grabinski, *Weltkriege*, 196.

³⁴Anna Kuntz was fined thirty marks for writing to a French prisoner. Landau Local Court, January 19, 1917, as cited in the Landau Petition.

³⁵*Frankfurter Zeitung*, September 1, 1916.

³⁶“Mit Franzosen unsittlich verkehrt,” *Münchener Post*, August 3, 1916, cited in Grabinski, *Weltkriege*, 194.

³⁷Reprinted in “Doppelte Moral im Kriege,” *Die Neue Generation* 3 (1917): 117.

³⁸Report from the medical attendant Bött, Hörstein, in HstAS, E130b Bü 3828, Stell. Generalkommando XIII. Armeekorps Staatsministerium—Kriegsgefangene, insbesondere Fürsorge und Abfindung, 1914–1931, 15.

³⁹Public Prosecutor Schröder, Landau, Pfalz, as cited in the Landau Petition (see footnote 1 above).

⁴⁰Zweibrüchen Local Court, January 10, 1917, as cited in the Landau Petition.

⁴¹Landshut Local Court, October 23, 1916, as cited in the Landau Petition.

been accused of carrying on a forbidden correspondence, but she ignored the court summons and carried on with her writing in a “busy fashion.” She had even sent a picture of herself to this prisoner. After hearing the evidence, the judge issued Rockert a “sharp condemnation” for the “shameful content of her letters.” He then sentenced her to six months in jail.⁴² The washerwoman H. of Sagen not only maintained spoken and written contact with a Russian POW, but also made an offer of marriage to him. She was sentenced to nine months’ imprisonment, and the judge made clear that his sentencing was based on the woman’s offer of marriage.⁴³ The Magistrate of Landshut, Bavaria, made special note that Amalie Steinherr’s fiancé and two brothers had fallen in battle against the French Army when he sentenced the unmarried waitress to three months’ imprisonment for “unauthorized relations” with a French prisoner.⁴⁴

The case of Anna Seißler provides a good illustration of just how far these new laws could reach. The daughter of an innkeeper in the Rhineland town of Oberstein, Seißler was arrested as a result of her relationship with a foreign prisoner. Somewhat unusually, however, she appealed her conviction in July 1918, using in her defense Article 4, No. 2 of the War Siege Law and the aforementioned pronouncement of the Acting General Commander. Seißler argued that in her case, there had been no “affair” (*Verkehr*) in the sense implied in the announcement, only a brief series of queries and replies shared over a noon meal. The conversation was brief, she testified, and made even briefer by language differences. Seißler admitted corresponding with the prisoner, but denied before the court that receiving postcards could constitute a “relationship.” Furthermore, she insisted, there was certainly nothing romantic about the postcards she received, as all they did was boast of the man’s proficiency in German! But prosecution countered Seißler’s arguments by showing that she in fact had had quite a lengthy conversation with the prisoner over lunch, which included the questions, “How old are you?” “Where is your home?” and “Are you enjoying Germany?” Also, according to the prosecution’s case, Seißler and the prisoner had employed the services of a local woman to help to carry on their illegal correspondence. On the basis of this evidence, Seißler’s appeal was denied.⁴⁵

While the law itself was far-reaching, it was not always easy for the authorities to monitor such intimate affairs. Some communities went so far as to employ “watchmen” to keep a close eye on their neighbors. In the Bavarian district of

⁴²“Verurteilung schamloser Weiber,” *DI Tageszeitung* 489, no. 27, September 27, 1915, in BAB R8034II. 7657, 184.

⁴³“Neun Monate Gefängnis für einen Heiratsantrag,” *DI Tageszeitung* 443, September 2, 1915, in BAB R8034II. 7657, 154.

⁴⁴*Bayerische Zeitung*, February 24, 1916.

⁴⁵Court Case of Anna Seißler, Local Court of Oberstein, August 4, 1918. KAM Stv. Gen. Kdo I AK 985.

Wertingen, the man “paid by the community to ensure morality and order” wrote a long letter to a prominent farmwoman, warning her that one of her young female farmhands was carrying on sexual affairs with at least two POWs:

Almost every early morning, they can be seen kissing in the barn, along with other wickedness, and it is truly terrible to see so young a girl, with her virginity still intact, letting herself fall victim to entirely foreign men, who have been here with us for such a short time. . . . We do not mean to imply that you must be responsible for the honor of your entire household, including your hired help. We only ask, heaven willing, that you talk to this girl . . . We think this will be sufficient. If not, there is always the option of putting her name up on the door of the church with the other girls and women, or of putting her on the pillory . . . We do not want to have to take stronger actions than this warning.⁴⁶

The watchman was concerned with neither the spread of venereal diseases nor the security risk of prisoner escapes, but instead made reference to “wickedness,” “virginity,” and “honor.”

Even in the face of “Peeping Tom” watchmen, nosy neighbors, and jail sentences, the affairs continued. This was made possible in many instances by the fact that some community members helped rather than hindered women who carried on affairs with enemy men. This again complicates our understanding of wartime society, echoing instead what historian Belinda Davis discovered in her work on “women of lesser means” in Berlin: a growing empathy toward women who were struggling to survive the war on the home front.⁴⁷ Though flirting with the enemy was not the same as queuing for bread, the following account from a small town in Bavaria shows us that Germans were increasingly willing to forgive the transgressions of their female neighbors in the waning months of a long war.

When police in Traunstein (Bavaria) began an investigation into the escape of three Serbian prisoners from a local camp in October 1918, they uncovered an entire neighborhood network of covert love affairs, smuggled letters, and secret meetings. Consisting of male and female members, the network ensured that local women were able to carry on affairs with imprisoned men. As just one example, Ellen Geigl, the war widow of a well-respected local lawyer, involved many local people in her relationship with the Serbian prisoner Stanojewtsch, an inmate of the Traunstein prisoner-of-war camp. On some occasions, Geigl would deliver letters and packages to Ursula Wild (whom police suspected as a ringleader

⁴⁶Letter from the Geheime Schutzwache O.S.P. to Frau Wiedemann, July 31, 1918. KAM Stv. Gen. Kdo. I AK 985 Band I, Abt. P I Kriegszustand, Aufrechterhaltung der öffentlichen Ordnung, Sicherstellung der Versorgung, Verkehr mit Kriegsgefangenen, 1915–1918.

⁴⁷Belinda J. Davis, *Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

of many such operations), who then passed them off to Adolf Stach, a Polish internee, who often used his job delivering coal to pick up parcels from Wild. Stach then made the delivery to Stanojewtsch. Geigl tried to involve her friend, Kitty Ruckdeschel, also a lawyer's wife, in the smuggling operation. Even though Ruckdeschel ultimately refused the request, Traunstein police continued to keep her under strict surveillance.⁴⁸ Geigl did convince her childhood friend, Lieutenant Kurt Mayer, to smuggle letters for her, an activity that resulted in a "severe reprimand" for that member of the Kaiser's Army.⁴⁹

For historians of World War I home fronts, such cases provide an intimate look at the "everyday" details of relationships between German women and foreign prisoners and illustrate that middle-class citizens could very easily become objects of police attention, and even surveillance, during wartime. Moreover, and perhaps more centrally, the cases illustrate the time and effort expended by state officials on policing immorality. The officers in the Traunstein case interviewed at least eight members of the local community. Their stated aim was to catch those responsible for prisoner escapes; however, it is clear from their notes that the female network of illicit affairs intrigued them more. In fact, the police officers placed such importance on the details of these seemingly innocuous tales, that they sent their files to the General Commander of the First Army Corps of the Bavarian Army. While we are unable to gauge his reaction to the smuggled letters, that there are similar records in his files illustrates that he did not regard relationships between Germans and captured enemy men as trivial.

That said, in the eyes of many Germans, lengthy and ineffective police investigations too often failed to punish adulterous women. We need only to think back to the Landau petitioners: they explicitly directed a "harsh word at officers and lawmakers," demanded closer surveillance of foreign workers, and sought stricter penalties for women found guilty of adultery.⁵⁰ For these Germans, thousands of arrests and investigations such as the ones conducted in Traunstein were sufficient proof that the state was not doing all it could to combat immoral affairs. Many Germans wanted instead to take matters into their own hands.

They thought public humiliation would be an effective deterrent. Some communities went so far as to suggest that the community pillory, a device that forced the guilty party to stand in public while passers-by hurled insults or even physical objects, be reinstated. It is unclear whether any women had to endure such medieval punishment, but we do know that hundreds of women had their names

⁴⁸Police Testimonies of Traunstein Surveillance Officer, October 10, 1918; Ursula Wild, October 18, 1918; Adolf Stach, October 17, 1918; Ellen Geigl, October 17, 1918; and Kitty Ruckdeschel, October 14, 1918. All in KAM Stv. Gen. Kdo. I AK 1404 Band I, Abt. P III Spionageabwehr, Sabotage, Kriegsgefangenen, Zivilinternierte, Postüberwachung, Lager Traunstein—Unerlaubter Verkehr mit Kriegsgefangenen. Einzelfälle, 1918.

⁴⁹Surveillance Officer of the Traunstein Prison Camp to Major Widder, October 18, 1918, in *ibid.*

⁵⁰Landau Petition.

posted in public places as punishment for their affairs. On a local level, church doors were an especially popular venue on which to display records of female shame. And, reaching a much larger audience was the widespread wartime phenomenon of the “press pillory.”

The Press Pillory

The German wartime press became a key venue for recording the myriad failings of the female citizen. Newspapers admonished women who grumbled in bread lines, spent their rations on luxury items, or dressed like “French hussies,” perhaps casting doubt in the minds of some readers that German women were indeed “doing their bit” for the war effort. Tales of unfaithful war wives fit well into this larger questioning of whether women really could take on more public roles until the men returned home from battle. Whether in the Courts section or in special columns actually titled “Press Pillory,” newspaper reports highlighted those aspects of adulterous affairs most likely to dismay, dishearten, and intrigue German wartime readers. Indeed, the press certainly played a large role in creating and defining the tropes and characteristics of the many “unpatriotic” women on the home front.

One of the most popular topics taken up in this way was the adulterous war wife who “enjoyed life” while her husband suffered in the trenches. For many Germans, sexual infidelity symbolized the isolation, alienation, and emasculation of the male combatant, because women, while their husbands were “confined” to the trenches, were “free” to be promiscuous. Wartime infidelity thus seemed to break the unwritten contract between the state and its soldiers. German men, so went the argument, had the right to know that they could return to faithful women at the end of the war.⁵¹ The *Elmshorner Nachrichten*'s (Schleswig-Holstein) article, “A Soldier Dies from the Sorrow of the Infidelity of his Wife,” told readers how “compatriot” H. B. committed suicide after discovering while on furlough that his wife had been unfaithful.⁵²

Along with the unfaithful wife, the iconic figure of the “bad mother” was prominent in newspaper reports. An article published in the *Breslauer Generalanzeiger* entitled “An Unworthy War Wife” told of a machine attendant who was sent to the front, subsequently captured, and then interred in a Russian prison camp. While the mechanic was imprisoned, his wife, Hedwig B., “embarked on a life of abominable moral conduct.” According to this article, she treated her two children cruelly, keeping them in the house only to receive more war support. She spent this war support on herself in local restaurants and inns, where she “kept company with questionable men.”⁵³ The reporter made clear that the behavior

⁵¹ Domansky, “Militarization,” 448–450.

⁵² *Elmshorner Nachrichten*, July 11, 1916, cited in Grabinski, *Weltkriege*, 168.

⁵³ *Breslauer Generalanzeiger*, April 10, 1916, cited in Grabinski, *Weltkriege*, 172.

of this woman was abhorrent for many reasons. First, her husband was a prisoner of the Russians and therefore powerless to stop her behavior. Second, she was neglecting her most important role—that of mother. Third, she was squandering the money given to her by the state, a common complaint against war wives. Finally, the woman was living her immoral life publicly in restaurants and inns—she did not even have the decency to be ashamed of her actions.

German newspapers frequently carried stories of women who acted in “unnaturally” violent ways to ensure the continuation of their extramarital affairs. A mason’s wife in Saarbrücken allegedly baked rat poison into a cake bound for her husband at the front, so she might carry on her affair with the baker.⁵⁴ Wilhelmine G. of Münster allegedly set fire to the bedroom of her three children so that she could continue unfettered her affair with a Russian POW, her husband being already imprisoned in a Russian camp.⁵⁵ The *Neue Preussische Zeitung* of November 1, 1916, wrote with great satisfaction in the column “On the Pillory” that a local court in Erfurt had sentenced a factory director’s wife named Elise to six months’ imprisonment for carrying on a love affair with a prisoner of war. The newspaper added that the younger sister of the accused only avoided a similar charge by committing suicide.⁵⁶ In Nuremberg, two war wives poisoned themselves with gas after their relationships with prisoners were discovered. They had both given the men civilian clothes and let them stay the entire night at their houses. All the while, their husbands were stationed at the front.⁵⁷ In Eberstadt (Hesse), the wife of a public servant stationed at the front was found dead with a Bulgarian. Both had ended their lives with a revolver shot to the head. This article, entitled “Suicide of a Pair of Lovers,” then offered the explanation that this middle-class woman had been living in a “childless marriage” and had long since been diagnosed with “nervousness.”⁵⁸

German newspapers strove to portray the infidelity of individual women as pernicious, because women failed to fulfill the key duties of the wartime female citizen. Among those duties, “seriousness” was especially important. A woman in Berlin-Mitte who met her prisoner-lover at their mutual workplace “forgot her duty” and was “quick to throw everything away.”⁵⁹ Another newspaper reported of the same case that the woman had “fancied” a French POW and “latched on to him in a highly reprehensible way.” The judge’s decision noted

⁵⁴ *Saal-Zeitung*, May 22, 1916, cited in Grabinski, *Weltkriege*, 174.

⁵⁵ *Münsterberger Zeitung*, June 14, 1916, reprinted in Grabinski, *Weltkriege*, 179.

⁵⁶ *Frankfurter Zeitung*, October 31, 1916, reprinted in *Die Neue Generation* 3 (1917): 117.

⁵⁷ “Doppelselbstmord zweier Kriegerfrauen aus Scham,” *Berliner Volkszeitung* 91, December 3, 1916, BAB R8034II. 7969 Reichslandbund—Pressearchiv, Stellung der Frau. Frauenbewegung, 1914–1919, 169.

⁵⁸ *Bosener Neueste Nachrichten* 5146, April 20, 1916, cited in Grabinski, *Weltkriege*, 168.

⁵⁹ Clipping from April 7, 1917, in BAB R8034II. 7661–7661, Reichslandwirt—Pressearchiv, Kriegs- und Zivilgefangenen, August 1916–April 1917, 198.

that the woman had “invited the scorn” of many honorable women, and he sentenced her to six months’ imprisonment.⁶⁰ The *Berliner Tageblatt* related to its readers that in sentencing a woman for helping a French prisoner escape, a Berlin judge said that the woman had not only “trampled [*mit Füßen getreten*] on the honor of all women,” but also on the honor of the German nation itself.⁶¹ The *Hofer Anzeiger* could barely bring itself to identify as German four newly convicted women, instead putting “*deutsche*” in quotation marks.⁶² Newspaper reporters were not alone in elevating these affairs to a national crisis. Commentators insinuated that women who had sexual encounters were betraying both their husbands and the German nation. The Acting General Commander in Stuttgart, for instance, wrote that women who engaged in such affairs “display an enormous disregard for individual honor and national pride, neither of which we can do without in these times.”⁶³

One reason for this tendency to conflate female licentiousness and national decline was the pervasive, albeit contested, bourgeois code of sexual behavior and separate spheres, both of which were predicated on the innate purity and sobriety of women. For many Germans, “*Deutsche Frau—Deutsche Treue*” was more than a truism. The immoral behavior of war wives seemed to challenge that image. Wartime reports increasingly complained that “the scandalous behavior of German women is starting to tarnish our reputation abroad.” One of the roles of the wartime German woman was to express the gravity of the situation at the front by the seriousness of their activities on the home front. Women’s chief tasks therefore included preserving the moral bedrock of society on which to build a successful postwar nation.

One of the most visible ways women were expected to reflect the seriousness of the war years was through their choice of clothing. The so-called “*Frauenmodefrage*” of the war years involved not only official restrictions on female clothing set in place by the state as part of its rationing campaign, but also larger issues of female immorality. For example, the Hanover Women’s Service published a pamphlet in which “flamboyant” clothing was defined as a “brazenly immoral [style] of women’s clothing that is completely un-German, that even in this time can be seen on the street, and that is tragic proof of the superficiality and thoughtlessness of those women who wear it. . . . It is a sign of the

⁶⁰“Wegen Verkehrs mit einem Kriegsgefangenen zu sechs Monaten Gefängnis verurteilt.” Clipping in BAB R.8034II.7970, Reichslandbund—Pressarchiv, Stellung der Frau. Frauenbewegung, 1914–1919, 98.

⁶¹“Neun Monate Gefängnis wegen Verkehrs mit Gefangenen,” *Berliner Tageblatt*, December 16, 1916. Clipping in BAB R.8034II.7661, 87.

⁶²*Hofer Anzeiger*, July 17, 1916, as cited in Grabinski, *Weltkriege*, 205.

⁶³Acting General Commander of the Thirteenth Army Corps (Stuttgart) to the Württemberg Ministry of Church and School Affairs, September 20, 1916. Landeskirchliches Archiv Stuttgart (hereafter LkAS), Dek. Balingen A921—Kirche während des Ersten Weltkrieg, 1914–1918, unfoliated.

worst type of degeneration.”⁶⁴ “Un-German” in the context of fashion and immorality usually implied French. Hence German newspapers exhorted women not to make themselves up like French hussies (even as French papers contrasted Parisian chic with the frumpiness of the *Hausfrau*).⁶⁵ With accompanying photo, a 1914 advertisement announced that “[t]he Parisian corset is dangerous and un-German.”⁶⁶ It was all the more galling to moral purity advocates that these French “hussies” were “entertaining” German husbands at the front. The war was supposed to “purge” the materialist cultures of Britain and France from German society and to effect a moral regeneration of the German family and *Volk*. But if German women were taking on the decadent, promiscuous behavior of French women, the argument went, what were the men fighting for?

Newspaper reports of sex scandals involving German war wives also consistently emphasized the “foreignness” of their prisoner-lovers. The names of prisoners were rarely printed in newspapers: usually they were referred to as only “the Russian prisoner,” or “the Frenchman.” Soon such terms were being used as metaphors or euphemisms for crimes against the nation. For instance, the *Nürnberger Zeitung* announced to its readers that a local servant girl had been sentenced to six months for “Russian Love.”⁶⁷ The apparent willingness of German women to become involved with enemy men was a slap in the face to propagandists who had been diligently constructing a racialized image of the Other. By placing the enemy within an intimate romantic scenario, the scandalous accounts of wartime relations unwillingly undermined the effort of state propagandists to create an image of the individual enemy combatant as a member of a barbaric horde.⁶⁸ And, as historian Andrew Evans has well illustrated, the definition of the racial Other was very fluid in wartime Germany. Anthropologists who used POW camps as wartime “laboratories” for their race-based research actually spent much of their time studying Germany’s European enemies, thereby contributing to the conflation of the categories of nation, ethnicity, and race in early-twentieth-century Europe.⁶⁹ It was only after World War I that commentators

⁶⁴ *Anruf an die deutschen Frauen*, as cited in Nancy Reagin, *A German Women's Movement: Class and Gender in Hanover, 1880–1933* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 197.

⁶⁵ H. C. Fischer and E. X. Dubois, *Sexual Life during the World War* (London: Francis Aldor, 1937), 107, 110.

⁶⁶ *Leipziger Illustrierte Zeitung*, as cited in Magnus Hirschfeld, *Sittengeschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Hanau am Main: Verlag Karl Schustek, 1929), 77.

⁶⁷ “Sechs Monate Gefängnis für Russenliebe,” *Nürnberger Zeitung* 117, April 28, 1916, cited in Grabinski, *Weltkriege*, 197.

⁶⁸ Capitalizing on the public’s curiosity about foreign men, an employee of a prisoner-of-war camp published a pamphlet in 1916, featuring photographs and explanatory write-ups on the different races and nationalities held prisoner in Germany. See O. Stiehl, *Unsere Feinde. 96 Charakterköpfe aus deutschen Kriegsgefangenenlagern* (Stuttgart: Julius Hoffmann, 1916).

⁶⁹ Andrew D. Evans, “Anthropology at War: Racial Studies of POWs during World War I,” in *Worldly Provincialism: German Anthropology in the Age of Empire*, ed. H. Glenn Penny and Matti Bunzel (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 198–229.

focused so intently on relationships between white German women and black colonial soldiers. The experience of the Black Shame on the Rhine campaign and the rise of the National Socialist racial state certainly encouraged commentators to emphasize the role played by nonwhite soldiers in wartime debates on promiscuous women. For instance, it was in 1937 that military doctors H. C. Fischer and E. X. Dubois reported that “the most cultured women fell in love with coarse males for no other reason than the exoticism of distant origin or a strange, and not necessarily attractive, appearance. Colored men, African Negroes, and others were particularly in favor during the war, and women fought for them.”⁷⁰

Despite these discursive elements of shame, selfishness, and dishonor, it is difficult to ignore the distinctively romantic tone with which newspapers flavored their reports. This feature of wartime reports is indicative of the conflict between disdain for adulterous women and a public hunger to read sensationalist tales of love, betrayal, and intrigue. One newspaper typified the way a bridge was built between these subgenres of wartime reportage in 1916:

A 39-year-old woman in Brenig, who had been married for 17 years, ran away with a 22-year-old Russian prisoner of war, whom she had known for only 14 days while he had been employed by her parents. She gave the Russian her brother's coat and also took the savings account book with a balance of 2,000 Marks. . . . Their escape route led them from Aachen to Cologne to Baals, but they were made conspicuous at the Dutch border by their lack of identity papers. The woman was sent home, and the Russian imprisoned in the local camp.⁷¹

The most revealing aspect of this passage is the writer's attempt to reconcile the genres demanded by two priorities: selling copy and maintaining wartime “seriousness.” On balance the first option seems to have carried the day. The reader is asked to picture the woman sneaking the coat and bank book out to the waiting prisoner, the two in a mad dash to the border, and the final capture and teary farewell. Adding to the drama, certainly, would be the seventeen-year age difference between the two. Such accounts remind us that while some Germans saw in such “troubling” stories the moral decline of the entire nation, others enjoyed reading a suspenseful and—especially—a voyeuristic tale.

Analyzing Degenerate Women

Relationships between German women and foreign men baffled Germans—and haunted them. The mystery deepened with each year that the war continued and long after it ended. What could tempt German women to betray both the sacred

⁷⁰Fischer and Dubois, *Sexual Life*, 101, 183.

⁷¹*Delisscher Tageblatt*, August 4, 1916, as cited in Grabinski, *Weltkriege*, 194.

union of marriages and their own Fatherland? Everyone seemed to have a theory as to why German women would behave in such an “un-German” fashion. Some believed it was an unfortunate, albeit temporary, side effect of the war. The unique circumstances of mass mobilization, loneliness, desperation, hunger, and the limiting of patriarchal control were all considered motivations that led otherwise moral women to commit immoral acts. Others argued that the German state undermined its own legitimacy by using POWs as laborers, thereby forcing healthy, young, and at least temporarily single men and women to work side by side. Some Germans blamed the biological weakness of the female sex, while others went so far as to posit race and degeneration theories as the principal causes of German women’s moral (self-)defilement.

The expanding field of sexology had a strong following in Germany even before World War I, and the events of the war years provided sexologists ample material to study and analyze. Dr. Enoch Heinrich Kisch, a Jewish-Czech gynecologist, published a book on women’s sexual infidelity just before his death in 1918. By analyzing the female genitalia and sexual drive, cultural influences, and the appeal of foreign men, this book sought to take a comprehensive look at the wartime phenomenon of female adultery. In a not-so-subtle jab at female sex reformers, Kisch pointed to the “emancipated woman” as being especially susceptible to adultery. In their quest to reform marriage and relations between the sexes, these women, argued Kisch, often forgot their moral upbringing.⁷²

Kisch went one step further when he sought to explain female infidelity with degeneration theory. The degenerate woman, he argued, was a category that constituted the greatest percentage of adulterers. For most such women the degeneration was hereditary: the tendency toward vice was “in their blood.” In turn, the development of these women’s spiritual and moral beliefs, and even their physical development, was hindered. Allegedly, many of these women exhibited deformed ears; poorly developed upper and lower jaws; small or projecting teeth; abnormally sized nasal openings; enlargement or shrinkage of the thyroid gland; and thick hair on the upper lip, chin, and cheeks. Spiritually, the degenerates had a delicate “ethical equilibrium”—a reduced capacity to feel guilt and to exercise self-discipline. They had an especially pronounced susceptibility to their sexual impulses, which made it difficult for them to remain true to one man.⁷³ While Kisch admitted that most women had a maternal urge to procreate and were therefore drawn to sexual activity by their innate desire to become pregnant, he argued that this was not the case for degenerate women.

⁷²Enoch Heinrich Kisch, *Die sexuelle Untreue der Frau* (Bonn: A. Marcus & E. Webers Verlag, 1917), 177.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 137–138.

When considering the sexual act, he concluded, such women were thinking only of their own pleasure.⁷⁴

Similarly, Dr. Isaak Spier-Irving's *Irrwege und Notstände des Geschlechtslebens im Krieg* (1920) attributed the affairs to the peculiar conditions of the war, by arguing that just as the war tore family bonds apart, women came to rely on their senses and desires instead of on the morals and ethics that had previously guided them.⁷⁵ Spier-Irving saved his worse condemnation for the so-called "Lulus": those female "creatures of lust" who even in peacetime "want every man they see." These women, according to Spier-Irving, had much more freedom to pursue their own pleasure during the war because women in general were allowed greater freedom of movement in public. As a consequence, "every day we see women becoming freer with their affections in public." The worst examples of this, Spier-Irving believed, were those women who accompanied their husbands to the train station and then started looking for their next "victim" before the husband's train had left.

Not all Germans categorized wartime romantic relationships in "scientific" terms, however. Authors such as Munich novelist Emma Haushofer-Merk believed the attraction between German women and POWs to be the inevitable consequence of their physical proximity during the war years. In a 1919 article, for instance, she worked from the provocative premise, "Is the prisoner, who cares so much for the property of his employer and whose strength is so necessary, still the enemy?" Haushofer-Merk conceded that in the early months of war, restrictions on conduct between Germans and foreign prisoners were probably necessary due to the threat of espionage and prisoner escape. As more prisoners became laborers, however, the men also became increasingly enmeshed in the social fabric of many small communities. State and military regulations became absurd at this point. For example, in cases where prisoners actually lived with the farming family, she asked, "How could you expect them not to become friendly?" Often, a mutual respect grew up between the two parties. In many instances, the prisoner worked diligently; the farmer, in turn, ensured he was well fed.

Many foreign POWs, Haushofer-Merk continued, welcomed the quiet of the countryside after the horrors of war. It was only natural that relationships should develop between individuals of each sex. They had both been separated from their spouses, for months or even years on end, and were young, healthy people. "At first, the young girls would laugh when the prisoners made eyes at them, and they shied away from the men's advances. But these young men often lived in their homes, worked beside them, and seemed to belong more

⁷⁴Ibid., 140.

⁷⁵Isaak Spier-Irving, *Irrwege und Notstände des Geschlechtslebens im Krieg* (Munich: Universal Verlag, 1920), 2–23.

and more in their lives. The Michaels, the Cyrils, the Alexanders—on some level they were merely young men with whom the girls spent a lot of time. The only difference was before the war, they would have been named Sepp, Hias, or Lenz.⁷⁶ *Die Gutsfrau*, a journal published for rural, mainly agricultural, women, echoed this sentiment in September 1918, questioning whether the regulations were too strict, as many of their readers had personally viewed the POWs as kind people just trying to get through the war. *Die Gutsfrau* no doubt echoed the sense of regret felt by many Germans when it wrote, “The actions of a few women spoiled things for the rest of us.”⁷⁷

Conclusions

Between the sensationalism of the press, the moralism of reformers, patriotic outrage, and the racism of the “scientists,” it is difficult to cut through the hyperbolic nature of wartime discourse to get at the reality of what actually happened in the bedrooms of Germany’s war wives. What Germans *thought* was happening, however, is historically as important as what was *really* happening. Germans came to believe that thousands of their women were betraying not only their husbands but also their sex, their children, their God, and their nation. Whether this was indeed true was a moot point. That the “immoral behavior” of war wives challenged the image of the innate sobriety, purity, and fidelity of the German woman was profoundly troubling for Germans, inducing many to question the proper wartime role of the female citizen. In the cases of German women accused of illegal contact with foreign prisoners of war, their private transgressions became fodder for public debates over the effects of total war on German society when their stories were retold in newspaper articles meant simultaneously to shock and entertain readers.

That reader reaction to stories of adultery and betrayal was complicated gives us another lens with which to view the changing gender terrain of the early twentieth century. For instance, many people seemingly failed to recognize that sexual agency could come in the shape of the female body. These same people took for granted that peacetime ideals of “respectable” femininity would continue seamlessly into the war years, even as women were expected to take on ever more

⁷⁶Emma Haushofer-Merk, “Ist der Kriegsgefangene noch ein Feind?,” in *Die Frau und die Kriegsgefangenen. Die Deutsche Frau und die fremden Kriegsgefangenen*, ed. Christoph Beck (Nuremberg: Dollinger & Co., 1919), 34–35. In his 1930 work, sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld echoed this line of thinking when he argued that wartime affairs were a necessary outlet for the sexual needs of women, which had been “dammed up by patriotic and national limits.” The war, argued Hirschfeld, had “almost pathologically increased the love needs of the soldier’s wife.” POWs acted as substitutes for the enlisted German men, in the face of this “war-imposed abstinence.” Hirschfeld, *Sexual History of the World War*, 46–47.

⁷⁷“Der Verkehr mit Kriegsgefangenen (Eine zeitgemäße Warnung),” *Die Gutsfrau* 6, no. 24 (September 15, 1918).

“male” responsibilities in the public sphere—hence, consternation with women who dared to wear trousers instead of skirts to their factory jobs, displayed aggression toward the neighborhood butcher, or stopped at the local pub for a pint in the evening. As we have seen again and again, whether in reports of a teenager flirting with soldiers in Düsseldorf or a married woman sneaking around with a Russian in Regensburg, it was not so much the sexual activity that disturbed Germans, it was the fact that many of these women were entering affairs of their own free will—engaging in intimate activities because they wanted to, not out of marital or financial obligation.

The discourse of female sexual infidelity might seem to historians to have been a distraction from core problems afflicting the home front: food shortages, profiteering, and the enormity of the war’s human cost. What this historical supposition misses is the level of interconnectedness between the war and the idea of cultural and national regeneration. At the heart of this regeneration was the ideal German Hausfrau, who was meant to maintain the “normalcy” of home and hearth until the men returned. That some of these women were engaging in romantic affairs with the enemy—men allegedly so barbaric that German soldiers were killing them to save German *Kultur* itself—called into question one of the principle reasons for this “defensive” war.

The sexual treason of German war wives became an enduring memory in postwar national consciousness. Some commentators placed promiscuous women in the category of “inner enemies” who had stabbed the German nation in the back. Less abstractly, there remained plenty of physical evidence of female infidelity through the 1920s, after hundreds of German women had become pregnant during their affairs with foreign prisoners. Though less vociferously than the national outrage that accompanied the birth of the so-called Rhineland Bastards a few years later, many Germans used the language of national degeneracy in the 1920s and 1930s to discuss the addition of “foreign blood” to their national stock. Little wonder, then, that during World War II Nazi officials tried to build on the “lessons” of the earlier conflict by building brothels for many of their forced laborers in an attempt to prevent the foreign men from again “tainting” German women.⁷⁸ These future developments do not constitute the main story, however. Between 1914 and 1918, the discourse surrounding sexual relationships between Germans and foreigners did not reach the same

⁷⁸Birthe Kundrus, “Forbidden Company: Romantic Relationships between Germans and Foreigners, 1939–1945,” in *Sexuality and German Fascism*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 201–222. For a comparison of the sexual lives of POWs in the two world wars, see also Fabien Théofilakis, “La sexualité du prisonnier de guerre: Allemands et Français en captivité (1914–1918, 1940–1948),” *Vingtième siècle* 99, no. 3 (2008): 203–219.

racialized levels they would in World War II. Yet even during the earlier conflict—what George Kennan termed *the* seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century—this discourse already constituted an important part of Germans' reach for a secure and defensible national identity.⁷⁹

UNIVERSITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK

⁷⁹G. F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875–1890* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), cited in Belinda Davis, "Experience, Identity, and Memory: The Legacy of World War I," *Journal of Modern History* 75, no. 1 (2003): 111–131, here 111.