Visual Propaganda and the Aryan Family: The Difficulties of De-Emancipating Women of the Third Reich

Elizabeth McNeill, Dr. Geoffrey Giles, and Dr. Eric Kligerman

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Florida

In alignment with its racial ambitions, the Third Reich implemented a robustly maternalistic propaganda campaign in attempt to convince “racially superior” women to return to the home and bear many children. This project analyzes the power of the visual in invading the female private sphere for the public benefit, specifically placing poster propaganda of mothers and families in their social, ideological, and visual contexts. It also identifies how visuals used the female body as an ideological map for Nazi racism and, in turn, fashioned women’s identities as wives and mothers. Scholars have argued that the myriad propaganda implemented by the Nazis was ineffective in increasing the birthrate. This project explores this finding by searching for a potential semiotic disconnect between the Nazis’ images of the ideal Aryan woman and an audience that had emerged from Weimar female emancipation. Ultimately, this project assesses the effectiveness of Nazi visual propaganda aimed at Aryan girls and women, which ultimately argued that motherhood glorified the Third Reich.

INTRODUCTION

Upon Adolf Hitler’s appointment as German chancellor in 1933, the Nazis quickly consolidated power and instituted reforms to sharpen the divide between races and sexes in the hope of creating a society of “racially superior” Aryans. Because the social structure of the Third Reich was based upon achieving racial purity, sex and gender policies targeted women’s reproductive capacities as a tool for national and racial revival. In accordance with the separate spheres ideology, men and women were allotted separate domains of work and influence based on their biological natures. As a “giver rather than a taker of life,” a woman’s destiny would be realized in motherhood and otherwise nurturing the Volk; whereas, the man would physically fight and labor. Indeed, a woman could best serve the State as she produced, raised, and educated “racially desirable” children. And through their emphasis of physical activity and racial awareness for both sexes, the Nazis effectively claimed citizens’ bodies for their own ambitions.

Tied up with the goals of racial purity and national revival, the Nazis used propaganda to create and perpetuate an ideal woman who prioritized the race and the Volk above her family and herself. Although the Nazis most regularly infiltrated the female private sphere via radio programs, they also employed visual propaganda—especially illustrated magazines, postcards, books, and posters—in convincing racially superior women that the fate of Germany hinged on their reproductive and maternal services. These images perpetuated an ideal Nazi housewife devoted to the Volk and an ideal Nazi family steeped in German tradition. More intimately, these images shaped a woman’s personal identification with Nazi ideology. Just as visual representations of the “new woman” of the Weimar era connected a woman’s reproductive activity (or lack thereof) to the nation’s health, visual representations of Aryan women during the Nazi era connected a woman’s reproductive activities and maternal devotion to her adherence to Nazi ideology.

Historian Jill Stephenson argues that, despite propaganda “constantly reminding [Aryan women] of their duty to procreate,” the 1934-1940 rise in birth rates was largely due to the rise in marriage rates, not the realization of the Nazis’ exemplary large family. This paper explores the Nazis’ robust maternalistic visual propaganda campaign aimed at Aryan women and families during 1933–1939, specifically focusing on the visual rhetoric contained within magazine covers in the home and posters in the public sphere. By first detailing Nazi ideology regarding the body, race, sexuality, art and visuals, women, families, and the domestic sphere, this paper offers original, cogent visual deconstructions of Nazi visuals. These visual analyses apply the concept of a visual language advanced during the visual turn, which is based on “the assumption that distinct scopic regimes or visual practices are relative to the cultures out of which they emerge.” Ultimately, this paper attempts to identify a relationship between the rise of Nazi visual propaganda and the formation of Aryan women’s social identities as wives and mothers and, in so doing, determine if a semiotic disconnect existed between the Nazis’ maternal images and their recently de-emancipated Weimar “new woman” audience.
Fascism and the Female Body: Ideology and the Image

On September 8, 1934, Hitler defined the Party’s attitude towards emancipation, women, and their nature in his address to the National Socialist Women’s section (NSF):

In the really good times of German life the German woman had no need to emancipate herself. She possessed exactly what nature had necessarily given her to administer and preserve; just as the man in his good times had no need to fear that he would be ousted from his position in relation to the woman…. Our National Socialist Women’s movement has in reality but one single point, and that point is the child, that tiny creature which must be born and grow strong and which alone gives meaning to the whole life-struggle.9

According to Hitler, German greatness waned as women denied their nature, instead stealing and donning the male role. Since nature had equipped women with bodies for producing children, destiny called them to preserve and empower the nation through their primary bodily capability: reproduction. In essence, Hitler’s definition of national greatness depended upon racial purity. In the racially superior Aryans’ “eternal struggle” against their enemies, women participated as the home-front fighting forces: their bodies fortified the Aryan race against degeneration. Just as men were encouraged to offer their lives to Germany’s fight, Hitler encouraged women to employ this same selfless attitude in their reproductive labors and daily sacrifices. By emphasizing the individual woman’s vital role as a mother within the collective body of the Volksgemeinschaft (“people’s community”) and her acts of bodily self-sacrifice for the race, the Nazis completely absorbed her private body into public affairs.

The Nazis sought to redirect women’s confused and diffused sexual energies (embodied in the sexually liberated and masculinized Weimar “new woman”) toward the glory of the Third Reich in the goal of expansion (Lebensraum) by calling them to produce racially superior Volksgenossen (“national comrades”) with which to populate Germany, Europe, and eventually the world.6 Through a constantly reverberating “rhetoric of selective natality” that permitted racially acceptable Germans to enjoy sex, the Nazis created new attitudes towards sexuality that abandoned both Victorian prudency and “degenerate” Weimar sexuality.7 But because the ideal Nazi woman surrendered her biological functions to regenerating and strengthening the German population, the function of sex was actually the “maintenance of life for the nation and not the enjoyment of the individual.”8 While the sexual function of female bodies was ideological, it was also practical—a woman’s heterosexual practices stabilized the racial, political, and social ambitions of the Third Reich.9

Undoubtedly, the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda was highly selective in what bodies represented the ideal, thereby employing a “racist aestheticism” that propagated “bodies whose beauty was supposed to demonstrate superiority over human beings from other races.”10 As Nazi ideology and visuals elevated the Aryan body, the nude female form especially articulated Nazi ideology, cultural history, racial identity, and social attitudes.11 By representing the people’s attachment to blood, soil, and destiny, artistic images of female bodies referenced Nazi ideology’s rendering of naturalism, which claimed to put people in touch with their natural racial and biological responses.12 As Nazi representations of the female body reclaimed an affinity with nature, they evoked the Aryan peoples’ primordial nature, desire for a racially pure state, and assurance of their own racial superiority. The articulation of racist ideology contained within the nude form sustained the Nazis’ racist body culture and perpetuated the entrenchment of racial ideology within the aesthetics of the female body.

By extension, a woman’s healthy Aryan body served as a microcosm of the healthy fascist state, a theme which was “reiterated in the images of the ‘sacred wife and mother’ in officially sanctioned art and promoted in a vast campaign enjoining women to lend their bodies to the movement to maintain the vitality of the race.”13 Indeed, Nazi art and other images propagated racially ideal Nordic women whose youthful and de-eroticized bodies invalidated the deformed bodies of Weimar modernist art.14 But more importantly, these images exalted the Aryan female body as the mother of a consummate racial state through her bodily sacrifice of birthing many children. The Aryan mother was the culminating model for women of the Third Reich.

A Woman’s Place: Bodies and Destinies

The Nazis’ social vision was a modern rendition of the traditional separation-of-spheres ideology, which presumes a biological difference between the sexes that determines their “natural” sphere of assignments: a woman’s “natural” place is with the children in the home and the man’s “natural” place is in the public sphere. A rhetorically flexible and traditional Nazi ideal woman thus emerged: a woman’s greatest contribution to society would be through her family—the “life source” of the people.”15 In turn, the Party specifically addressed women’s concerns by upgrading attitudes towards and expanding upon women’s work, encouraging Aryan women to embrace their “natural” domestic role as housewives and mothers, and placing great value on their racial contributions as the bearers and educators of future generations.16 Nazi
ideology sought not to force women into a new role, but rather to praise and encourage the unique contributions they could make as women.  

As evidenced by the Nazis’ aim to physically strengthen Aryans in order to propagate a healthy race, the racial concerns of the Third Reich trumped gender concerns and ultimately structured society. Because the State’s main focus was not on politically silencing women or pushing them back into the home, but on reconstructing society according to its racial ideologies. Women were valued for their reproductive abilities, which could be best encouraged if they remained in the private sphere. Racism preceded and molded sexism: the Nazis emphasized the separation of spheres for its ability to contribute to their larger racial aims. The ideal woman’s concerns rested with the race and Volk, far above her family and herself. 

The Nazi separation of spheres—and the propagation of the ideal domestic mother figure therein—was flexible, practical, and offered Aryan women an important semi-independent status within the Reich. Because the strict maintenance of the distinction between the sexes was less important than that of the races, the exclusive emphasis on women’s roles as mothers could not stand in the face of more pressing racial, social, and economic needs. During the period of 1933–1939, the image of the “mother of the Volk” remained stable; but beginning in 1939, the wartime requirements of women bent to satisfy wartime economic demand. Indeed, motherhood served the Reich’s purposes, rather than existing solely as a spiritual and moral ideal.

**Shaping the Ideal Woman: Visual Propaganda in the Home**

The Third Reich employed the persuasive power of images. In both the public and private spheres, images excluded racial and social “outcasts,” posited an ideal citizen, and then molded people via ideological training and identification with the ideal. Before attending to the rhetorical intricacies of posters in shaping Aryan women as mothers and housewives, one must examine the propagandistic visuals that invaded their private lives, most notable being magazine covers. To be sure, posters in the public sphere did not exist in a propagandistic vacuum—a poster was intended to effect clear visual communication, but its message was an element in a coordinated ideological attack intended to shape a highly partitioned, racially ideal society. Because magazine covers functioned similarly to poster propaganda in the clarity, simplicity, and attention-grabbing power of their visual message, this paper will therefore treat magazine covers as poster propaganda intended for home use while simultaneously recognizing advantages for the historian in analyzing magazine covers. Indeed, a magazine’s affiliation with a specific Nazi organization enables one to understand the motivations behind the images and then follow the progression of communicating that ideology. Moreover, the date on the cover allows the historian to confidently identify the visual’s historical moment.

In general, illustrated magazines were especially effective pieces of propaganda because the viewer could hold the slim volume in her hands, flip through its colorful pages, and personally interact with it on a level not available in poster propaganda. Through its potential placement within the home on the family-room coffee table, the magazine assimilated into a woman’s home, life, and consciousness. And the short articles and clear images within magazines corresponded with the Nazis’ expectations of a busy housewife’s schedule: although ideological training was of vital importance, she should forego heavy reading and care for her children, husband, and home instead.

The most important women’s magazine was *Frauenwarte* ("Women’s Outlook"), which was the Party’s official biweekly illustrated magazine. *Frauenwarte* emphasized women’s roles as housewives and mothers with articles on practical domestic tips, childcare advice, and other topics that would particularly interest housewives. The 1937/1938 illustrated cover (Figure 1) perfectly demonstrates the magazine cover’s effectiveness in visually communicating Nazi ideology. In this particular image, a blonde woman sits in the foreground and holds a smiling blonde baby girl upon her bosom. Directly behind her, a tanned, blonde man brandishes a sword and shield—an explicit reference to the Nordic fighting ideal. Behind him and to the left, an agricultural worker plows a field outside of the picture. The distinction between male and female social roles, reminiscent of Hitler’s description of personal struggle, is apparent: the woman rests in the private sphere with her child, whereas the men labor and fight in the field. Although the hierarchical nature of the image places the baby and woman (private sphere) below the men (public sphere), the sun (Germany’s “day in the sun,” as realized in the Third Reich) triumphs above both in the upper-left corner. By way of further harmonizing the characters, all four stare into the same distance, which represents the glorious future of the Reich. Crucially, the nature of their individual stares, coupled with their tasks, dictates the means by which each Aryan man, woman, and child can achieve that future. This cover’s portrayal of a gender hierarchy, distinct separation of spheres, and bodily self-sacrifice can be found in numerous posters.
The Nazis could essentially rid the racially unfit, the mentally unfit, and the social outcasts—in short, the enemies of the Volk—from social consciousness. The poster operated as a 2-D stage that glorified the purity of the Aryan people, whereas the “racially impure” bodies of the Jews were almost always presented on posters as caricatures. As opposed to the canvases of the celebrated Nazi paintings and the bronze and stone of the awe-inspiring Nazi sculptures, posters were not designed for permanence. Nevertheless, posters married the permanence of Nazi ideals to ever-changing strategies to effectively present these ideals. This section will dissect the visual techniques and themes employed in pre-war poster propaganda (indicative of an ideal society) that glorified the healthy, ideal motherhood and buttressed the Nazis’ aim to increase the Aryan birthrate.

Although poster propaganda mainly used illustrations rather than photographs, photographs pointed to societal modernization and, more importantly, merged better with reality. Indeed, the mother within the photograph escaped the mere confines of aesthetic representation and became a living role model for German motherhood that all “racially superior” women could and should aspire to. On the other hand, illustrations suggested the eternal German spirit through the subject’s permanence and easily duplication: just as an artist could easily produce a new poster through his artistic abilities, the German mother could also produce more children through her maternal being.

In attempting to evoke women’s identification with Nazi ideology regarding motherhood, Nazi poster propaganda portrayed an idealized mother who sacrificed body and identity to the Reich. Mothers are thus depicted as never alone: they are shown either caring for one child, usually by breastfeeding, or surrounded by several children. As one might expect, these mothers are blonde, physically sturdy Aryans and are either peasants or display signs of having returned to nature and German tradition. Interestingly, they appear to be in their 30s and 40s and their children appear to be under ten. With few exceptions, mothers are depicted before a scene of sky and nature, amidst a black background (free of time and space constraints), or within a domestic scene. These settings suggest their faithfulness to “what nature had necessarily given” them, enduring repercussions of their maternal devotion, and perfect fit within the domestic sphere, respectively. In a broad sense, representations of Aryan mothers with their children embodied the racial, physical, and moral superiority of the Aryan people as the mother found joy in caring for her children and fulfilling her “natural” feminine role.

The theme of breastfeeding before a scene of sky and nature was popular and rhetorically significant because these images coupled the fecundity of the nature with the fertility of the mother’s body. In a poster for the Mother and Child Relief Agency, the caption reads: “Deutschland wächst aus starken Müttern und gesunden Kindern” (“Germany grows through strong mothers and healthy
children”) (Figure 2). This caption bears a striking resemblance to Reich Minister of Propaganda Dr. Joseph Goebbels’ 1934 speech to German women, in which he declared a “new German womanhood” of willing, healthy mothers: “If the nation once again has mothers who proudly and freely choose motherhood, it cannot perish. If the woman is healthy, the people will be healthy.” As the mother employs her body to nourish her child (representative of future generations of healthy Germans), she symbolizes the “mother of the Volk” who nourishes the German people.

This poster above also indicates the importance of the mother’s gaze, in alignment with Goebbels’ words about the returning to a traditional perception of womanhood: “These [Weimar] revolutionary transformations have largely taken women from their proper tasks. Their eyes were set in directions that were not appropriate for them. The result was a distorted public view of German womanhood that had nothing to do with former ideals.”

Indeed, the minimization of the text and the prevalence of the sky around the mother’s head direct the viewer’s eyes to hers, which are set in the direction of her baby and its nourishment. And because her eyes are averted from the viewer’s, she is to be gazed upon. In the case of a male viewer, this visual technique transforms his gaze into an act of sexual aesthetic consumption. However, the mother’s wholly maternal, de-sexualized characterization subverts any potential sexuality and, instead, reminds one of the reproductive purposes of sex: the child, the race, and the Reich. Overall, posters that highlighted the mother’s gaze—and poster propaganda, in general—reminded Aryan women of the higher calling for their bodies and their lives.

The Family is the “Cell of the State”: The Aryan Family in Poster Propaganda

Because the family was deemed the “cell of the state,” the Nazis argued that it should be protected and promoted. Unsurprisingly, posters of large “racially healthy” families were therefore prolifically created and disseminated. These images ultimately intertwined the wellbeing of the family with that of the State and attempted to convince women of their importance within both social units.

The positioning of subjects within representations of the Aryan family indicates a hierarchy of protection while simultaneously denoting a woman’s crucial role as the family’s nucleus. Fittingly, women are most often placed in the middle of the family. Although the representation of Aryan men in poster propaganda is beyond the scope of this paper, one must note that the ideal man’s masculine characterization provided little escape from the Nazis’ rigid masculine-feminine binary. The man was charged with serving the State and protecting his wife, who was charged with serving and protecting the children. The image that best exemplifies this hierarchy is the undated poster entitled “Die NSDAP sichert die Volksgemeinschaft: Volksgenossen braucht ihr Rat und Hilfe so wendet euch an die Ortsgruppe” (“The Nazi Party secures the people’s community: National comrades, if you need advice and help, then turn to your local [Nazi Party] unit”) (Figure 3). In this poster, hands and arms ultimately symbolize protection, responsibility, and submission. Just as the man had to protect his wife and educate his son, the man places his arms around his wife and son. Both of the woman’s arms wrap around her baby. And the ultimate protector, the German eagle, spreads its wings to encompass all members of the family, who as indicated by the poster title, embody the entire Volksgemeinschaft. As such, the protective capacity of the State deserves the woman’s ultimate submission – above self, child, family, and husband.

This poster’s employment of the gaze creates relationships between subjects through eye contact. However, these relationships diverge from those in other posters. In images of the family, the mother’s attention is ultimately symbolized with that of the State. The man, who was charged with protecting himself, his family, and the State, is ultimately symbolized with the image of the eagle. The image that best exemplifies this hierarchy is the undated poster entitled “Die NSDAP sichert die Volksgemeinschaft: Volksgenossen braucht ihr Rat und Hilfe so wendet euch an die Ortsgruppe” (“The Nazi Party secures the people’s community: National comrades, if you need advice and help, then turn to your local [Nazi Party] unit”) (Figure 3). In this poster, hands and arms ultimately symbolize protection, responsibility, and submission. Just as the man had to protect his wife and educate his son, the man places his arms around his wife and son. Both of the woman’s arms wrap around her baby. And the ultimate protector, the German eagle, spreads its wings to encompass all members of the family, who as indicated by the poster title, embody the entire Volksgemeinschaft. As such, the protective capacity of the State deserves the woman’s ultimate submission – above self, child, family, and husband.
Volksgemeinschaft,” the son expresses similar admiration for the baby and the daughter happily engages with the viewer. The daughter’s relationship with the viewer demonstrates the joy she, as a future mother, receives from the health of the family that, in turn, she must communicate with the viewer.

**CONCLUSION**

Visual propaganda clearly and powerfully articulated Nazi ideology, and its racially ideal society, by giving people’s desires a physical body and a hope of realization. For an Aryan woman, images of the ideal mother and family shaped her personal identification with Nazi ideology as she could imagine herself within and work towards this society by implementing attitudes and actions offered in these images. Many women, however, did align their lives with Nazi propaganda’s praise of women’s “natural” abilities in realizing “Germany’s place in the sun.” Thus, the real difficulty of de-emancipating women derived from the discrepancy between image and reality in the Third Reich, as evidenced in visual propaganda. The rise in the 1933–1940 birthrate due to marriage rates illuminates the greater importance of Nazi policies in shaping women’s conceptions of themselves as mothers and housewives. For instance, a flurry of Nazi organizational activities pulled the family apart in deference to the racial community, thereby diminishing the importance of the woman within the family unit. Whether or not visual propaganda was effective in increasing the birthrate, the “mother image” and motherhood, in general, were rhetorically flexible enough to socially elevate women to action and, in turn, serve the Nazis’ racial and social purposes.

**ENDNOTES**


2 Volk literally translates to “people” or “nation,” but mere translation does not convey the mystical connotation of a people’s shared racial heritage and destiny. Matthew Stibbe, *Women in the Third Reich* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2003), 43.


6 Lebensraum (“living space”) was Hitler’s political idea that the German people need space in the East for autonomy. Over time, it developed into the idea that Aryans must breed and struggle for greater space.


10 Wilfried van der Will, “The Body and the Body Politic as Symptom and Metaphor in the Transition of German Culture to National Socialism,” in *The

11 Richardson, 71.

12 Ibid., 55.


14 Richardson, 68.

15 Ibid., 32.

16 Stibbe, 40; Rupp, 35.

17 Richardson, 60.


20 Stibbe, 43.

21 Rupp, 44.

22 Richardson, 12.

23 Images within Nazi books for women were also important, but the greater visibility of magazine covers designates its special attention within this paper.

24 Kate Lacey, "Driving the Message Home: Nazi Propaganda in the Private Sphere," in Gender Relations in German History: Power, Agency and Experience from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century, ed. Lynn Abrams and Elizabeth Harvey (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 203.


30 Ibid.

31 Michaud, 46.