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## **Unmasking the Furies: The Overlooked Role of Women Perpetrators in the Holocaust**

The Holocaust, a horrific genocide that systematically murdered six million Jews, is often portrayed as a crime perpetrated primarily by men. However, Wendy Lower's groundbreaking work, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, challenges this conventional narrative by exposing the active and often brutal participation of women in the genocide. *Hitler's Furies* is a vital contribution to Holocaust studies, not only for exposing the shocking extent of female involvement in the atrocities, but also for challenging traditional gender roles and perceptions of violence. This essay argues that *Hitler's Furies* compels a re-evaluation of the Holocaust as not solely a male-perpetrated genocide, but one in which women were active and willing participants, driven by a complex interplay of ideological indoctrination, social pressures and personal ambitions.

*Hitler's Furies* focuses on the experiences of German women who migrated to the eastern occupied territories during World War II. These women, often young and ambitious, were not hardened criminals but rather ordinary individuals seeking adventure, career advancement, and a chance to escape the traditional confines of German society. Lower meticulously examines the various roles these women played in the Holocaust, including nurses, teachers, secretaries, and wives of SS officers. Through extensive research and vivid storytelling, Lower reveals how these women became complicit in the Nazi regime, either through direct participation in the killings or by supporting the perpetrators.

One of the most disturbing aspects of *Hitler's Furies* is the revelation of seemingly ordinary women transformed into active participants in the Holocaust. Lower argues that these women were not inherently evil but rather a product of their environment and the prevailing Nazi ideology. As she states, "The Nazi regime mobilized a generation of young female revolutionaries who were conditioned to accept violence, to incite it, and to commit it, in defense of or as an assertion to Germany's superiority" (pg. 166). This conditioning, combined with the opportunities presented by the Nazi regime, fostered an environment where women who once lived ordinary lives could commit extraordinary acts of violence.

This book provides numerous examples of this transformation. One of the most shocking cases is that of Erna Petri, a young nurse turned mass murderer, who admitted to killing numerous Jewish men and children. When asked why she committed such atrocities, Petri initially replied, "I did not want to stand behind the SS men. I wanted to show them that I, as a woman, could conduct myself like a man. So I shot 4 Jews and 6 Jewish children. I wanted to prove myself to the men. Besides, in those days in this region, everyone heard that Jewish persons and children were being shot, which also caused me to kill them" (pg.155). She had claimed that she was "young and inexperienced" and wanted to prove she could do anything that a man could do. Later on in the interview, after learning that she had become a mother herself, the interviewers asked how she was able to brutally kill Jewish children she responded, "I am unable to grasp at this time how in those days that I was in such a state as to conduct myself so brutally and reprehensibly - shooting Jewish children... I had been so conditioned to fascism and the racial laws, which established a view toward the Jewish people. As was told to me, I had

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<sup>1</sup> Use of AI: Used Chat GPT to Generate a Title. The prompt I inserted was "I am writing an essay about women perpetrators in the Holocaust and heavily referencing *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* by Wendy Lower. Can you create a title that would fit my essay please"

to destroy the Jews. It was from this mindset that I came to commit such a brutal act” (pg.156). Petri’s case illustrates how the pervasive anti-semitism and the dehumanization of the victims created an environment where even the seemingly “ordinary” woman could be converted into a perpetrator of violence.

Lower emphasizes that these women were not just passive bystanders but active opportunists, noting that, “They were all ambitious and patriotic; to varying degrees they also shared the qualities of greed, anti-semitism, racism, and imperialistic arrogance. And they were all young” (pg. 164). The Nazi regime provided these women with opportunities for social and economic advancement, which they readily exploited, often and usually at the expense of the victims.

The question of whether the actions of these women were driven by nature or nurture is a complex one, and *Hitler’s Furies* provides valuable insights into this debate. Lower suggests that both nature and nurture played a role in shaping the behavior of these women. On the one hand, the prevailing Nazi ideology and the social environment created a context where violence and anti-semitism were normalized and even encouraged. On the other hand, Lower makes a point to acknowledge the individual agency of these women, who made conscious choices to participate in the atrocities.

Lower notes that the “The story of the growth of female violence during the Reich is intertwined with a sexual revolution that tested boundaries and definitions of matrimony, procreation, child rearing, femininity and pleasure” (pg. 136). This suggests that the changing social norms and the loosening of traditional gender roles may have also contributed to the willingness of some women to embrace violence. However, they were also described to be opportunists, as “Many female murderers held positions in the professional world - secretaries and nurses, for example. Trained and socialized at a particular moment in time, in Hitler’s Germany, they exploited their power as imperial overseers and careerists” (pg. 141). This portrays that personal ambition and a desire for recognition may have also played a role in the actions of some women. Ultimately *Hitler’s Furies* suggests that the motivations behind the actions of female perpetrators were complex and multifaceted, stemming from a combination of societal pressures, ideological indoctrination, personal ambition, and individual choices.

It is important to consider how typical Erna Petri’s experience was and whether other women shared her motivations. Lower provides compelling evidence that, while Petri’s case was particularly brutal, her motivations were not unique. Many women, like Petri, were driven by a desire for recognition and advancement, and they readily embraced the opportunities provided by the Nazi regime, even if it meant participating in horrific crimes.

*Hitler’s Furies* also challenges traditional gender roles and perceptions of violence. Lower argues that the participation of women in the Holocaust disrupts the notion of women as inherently peaceful and nurturing. She states, “To assume that violence is not a feminine characteristic and that women are not capable of mass murder has obvious appeal: it allows for hope that at least half of the human race will not devour the other, that it will protect children and so safeguard the future. But minimizing the violent behavior of women creates a false shield against a more direct confrontation with genocide and its disconcerting realities” (pg.158). This quote is incredibly powerful in portraying the danger of underestimating women, and relying on predetermined expectations and stereotypes that define and constraint people to that of one category. Lower’s work highlights the need to re-examine the role of gender in violence and genocide. The actions of the women in *Hitler’s Furies* demonstrate that women are capable of perpetrating violence and participating in genocide. This realization challenges the traditional

gender binary and forces us to confront the uncomfortable reality that violence is not limited to one gender.

*Hitler's Furies* has garnered significant attention from scholars, generating both praise and criticism. Elizabeth Heineman, in her review for *The Women's Review of Books*, commends Lower for expanding the understanding of women's roles in the Holocaust beyond the traditional victim-bystander-perpetrator categories. Heineman highlights the importance of Lower's work in challenging stereotypes and exposing the complex motivations of women who participated in the atrocities. However, she also raises some questions about lower's methodology, particularly her reliance on individual narratives and the categorization of women's roles.

Donna Harsch, in her review for *Central European History*, acknowledges the book's contribution to the Holocaust scholarship but also raises some critical points. Harsch points out that the neglect of women's agency in the Holocaust has been challenged by previous scholars and that Lower's claim of originality may be overstated. Additionally, Harsch criticizes Lower's lack of a gendered analysis, arguing that it hinders a deeper understanding of the power dynamics and gender relations within the Nazi regime.

Next is Shana Penn, who in her reviews for *Politeja*, praises *Hitler's Furies* for its exploration of the motivations behind women's participation in the Holocaust. Penn emphasises Lower's focus on the "ordinary" nature of these women, who were not necessarily driven by fanaticism but rather by a combination of factors, including ambition, opportunity, and the prevailing anti-Semitic climate. Penn also highlights the book's contribution to the growing scholarship on gender and the Holocaust, particularly its challenging of the notion of women as mere imitators of male violence.

While Lower's work has faced criticism, particularly regarding its originality and lack of comprehensive gendered analysis, I believe that its contribution to the Holocaust scholarship is undeniable. Lower's exploration paired with her captivating writing bring to life the experiences of these women, challenging stereotypes and exposing the complex motivations behind their complicity in the Nazi regime. By unveiling the dark side of female participation in the Holocaust, *Hitler's Furies* forces us to confront the uncomfortable reality that women are capable of perpetrating violence and participating in genocide, just as men are.

*Hitler's Furies* is a significant contribution to Holocaust studies, shedding light on the often-ignored role of women in the atrocities. Lower's meticulous research and eye-opening narrative bring to life the experience of these women, challenging stereotypes and exposing the complex motivation behind their complicity in the Nazi regime. While the book has faced some criticism for its methodology and conclusion, its impact on the Holocaust scholarship is undeniable. By unveiling the dark side of female participation in the Holocaust, *Hitler's Furies* forces us to confront the reality that women are capable to perpetrating violence and participating in genocide, just as men are. This book serves as a reminder that the study of the Holocaust must include the experiences and actions of all members of society, regardless of gender, in order to gain a complete understanding of this dark chapter in human history. This book also raises important questions about the nature of evil and complex interplay of nature and nurture in the shaping of human behavior, questions that continue to resonate today.

## Citations:

**Harsch, Donna. *Central European History*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2014, pp. 875–77. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43965101>.**

Harsch's review offers a more critical perspective in Lower's work, challenging some of her claims and conclusions. Harsch argues that Lower overstates the originality of her work and neglects the contributions of previous scholars who have examined women's roles in the Holocaust. She also criticizes Lower's lack of a gendered analysis, arguing that it limits the book's ability to fully explain the complex power dynamics and gender relations within the Nazi regime.

**Heineman, Elizabeth. "Women's Complicity." *The Women's Review of Books*, vol. 31, no. 6, 2014, pp. 15–16. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24430629>.**

Heineman's review provides a thoughtful analysis of Lower's work, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. While acknowledging the book's significant contribution to Holocaust scholarship, Heineman also raises critical questions about Lower's methodology and categorization of women's roles. She also points out the limitations of relying solely on individual narratives and the need for a broader contextual analysis.

**Lower, Wendy. *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*. Mariner Books, October 3, 2013. Chapters 5 & 6, 270 pages.**

This groundbreaking work exposes the active and often brutal participation of women in the Holocaust, challenging traditional narratives and forcing a reassessment of the role of gender in violence in genocide. Lower's statistics and colorful writing bring to life the experiences of these women, revealing their diverse motivations.

**PENN, Shana, and Wendy Lower. *Politeja*, no. 39, 2015, pp. 423–28. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24920183>.**

Penn's review focuses on the psychological and social factors that contributed to the transformation of ordinary women into perpetrators of violence. She explores the role of ambition, opportunity, and ideological indoctrination in shaping the behavior of these women. Penn also highlights the importance of Lower's work in challenging traditional gender roles and perceptions of violence, emphasizing the need to recognize the capacity for cruelty in both men and women.