The Emergence of Gender Role Anxieties in the Weimar Republic

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In response to Richard McCormick's examination of the portrayal of male gender anxieties in film in Weimar Germany, this article examines the evolution of the patriarchal identification of masculinity in Weimar Germany, with a particular focus on various social factors that contributed to the development of the sense of uncertainty about the role of German men that McCormick examines in cinematic media. Beginning with the Great War and its influence on frontline troops, the article continues on to examine psychological and economic forces that undermined the traditional idea of male identity as a separate phenomenon from the emergence of the modern, liberated 'New Woman' in Weimar society.

In the nineteenth century, household structure in Germany was still determined by the social ideology of patriarchy, with "wives and children [remaining] under the all powerful thumb of the *Übervater,*"[*1] Anti-feminist organizations were formed in the late Wilhelmine years with the goal of cementing "the most basic of propositions…that women were properly confined to the domestic sphere of home and family," and that the "functions of the private sphere were…subordinate to those of the public," that is, the realm occupied by men. [2] However, following the First World War, a crisis of traditional gender roles emerged in the Weimar Republic. In his article "Private Anxieties/Public

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[*] Meaning "father figure."

[1] Tom Taylor, "Images of Youth and the Family in Wilhelmine Germany: Toward a Reconsideration of the German Sonderweg," *German Studies Review* 15, German Identity (Winter, 1992): 55, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1430640.

[2] Roger Chickering, "'Casting Their Gaze More Broadly': Women's Patriotic Activism in Imperial Germany," *Past & Present,* 118 (Feb., 1988): 156-157, http://www.jstor.org/stable/650834.

Projections: 'New Objectivity,' Male Subjectivity, and Weimar Cinema," Richard McCormick examines the use of film during the cultural era known as 'New Objectivity' as a tool to express male anxieties regarding changing gender roles in the Weimar Republic. He argues that the modernized technology of cinema acted as a "[tool] for examining and controlling precisely the destabilization that women were seen to represent…"[3] In particular, McCormick focuses on the 'New Woman' and he examines how this unfamiliar, independent, and liberated creature was the focus of these gender insecurities that plagued German men in the Weimar Republic. This paper does not endeavor to prove or disprove McCormick's argument. Rather, this paper seeks to explore the causal factors that fostered the development of those private anxieties that McCormick observes in culture in the Weimar period. Male gender insecurities in Weimar Germany were not generated by the emergence of a new definition of femininity. Men in the Weimar Republic did not suddenly feel threatened as women became more visible in the public sphere. Male anxieties about gender roles in the Weimar Republic originated from the erosion of the traditional German sense of masculinity. A series of political, social, and economical factors, independent of women, combined to challenge the conventional order of life that men were used to, which resulted in the undermining, or perhaps redefining, of the traditional role of a German man. As post-war men embodied the weakness of the Weimar Republic, the arrival of women into the public eye signified a correlation between the decline of the dominant German male and the rise of a new type of woman. This paper shall examine the forces that challenged the German

[3] Richard W. McCormick, "Private Anxieties/Public Projections: 'New Objectivity', Male Subjectivity, and Weimar Cinema," *Women in German Yearbook* 10 (1994): 8, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688794.

understanding of masculinity. It shall then look at how the sudden visibility of women confronted German men with physical manifestation of their internal fears about changing gender roles in the Weimar Republic; however, it was the combination of external forces eroding the traditional ideal of masculinity that enabled the emergence of an emancipated woman to have such profound effect on the security of the identity of German men in the Weimar Republic.

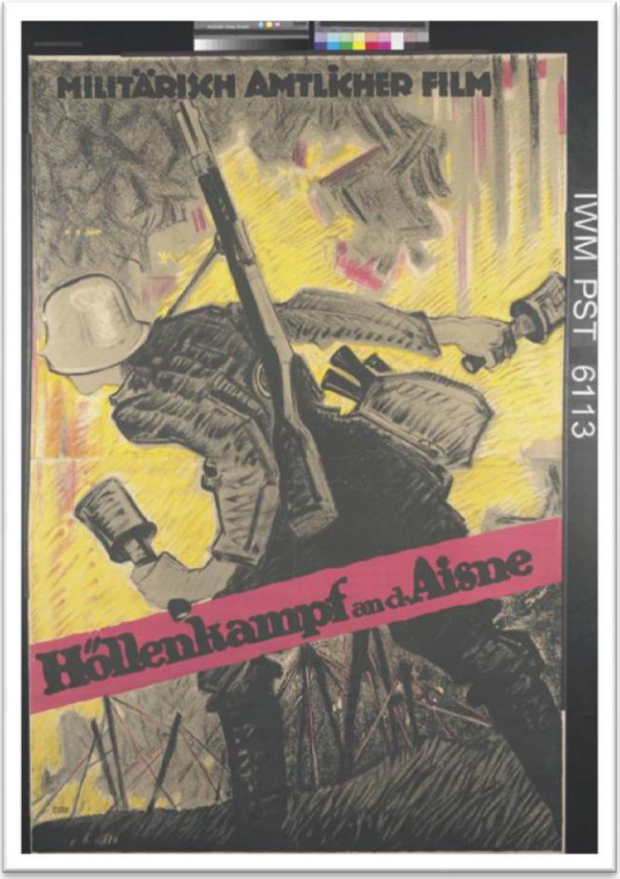

Figure A: Hans Rudi Erdt, *Höllenkampf an der Aisne [Desperate Battle on the Aisne]*, Poster collection at Imperial War Museum, London. http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/8641.

The Great War had a devastating effect on the men of Germany. The modernization of military technology had given birth to a new kind of warfare where soldiers spent days imprisoned in the trenches, showered by bombs dropped by a faceless enemy.[4] According to Susan Funkenstein, the popular image of the ideal German man that was perpetuated during World War One, by artists such as Otto Dix, was of a "hoped-for leader of the masses."[5] However, as the war dragged on, soldiers were forced to adopt a more inactive role as they cowered in the ground, which contradicted the image of the stoic hero that was being perpetuated on the home front through media publications and political endorsements.[6] Unlike the representation of the active soldier in combat [Figure A], the soldiers in the trenches were dominated by the new mechanics of battle. The brutal conditions of the front eroded away at the widely held image of masculinity, as the war of attrition resulted in the inability for men to participate actively in their circumstances. The industrialized nature of warfare and the inability to control their circumstances forced soldiers to adopt a passive role. The war was in every way a male event. Yet, in an environment in which women were completely absent, German masculinity was challenged. Because of the new nature of warfare, the soldiers were unable to initiate action; they had to shift into a more

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[4] Jason Crouthamel, "Male Sexuality and Psychological Trauma: Soldiers and Sexual Disorder in World War I and Weimar Germany," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 1 (Jan., 2008): 67, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30114369.

[5] Susan Laikin Funkenstein, "A Man's Place in a Woman's World: Otto Dix, Social Dancing, and Constructions of Masculinity in Weimar Germany," *Women in German Yearbook* 21, (2005): 170, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688251.

[6] Dora Apel, "'Heroes' and 'Whores': The Politics of Gender in Weimar Antiwar Imagery," *The Art Bulletin* 79, no. 3 (Sep., 1997): 368, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3046258.

dependent role. In this masculine environment, the idealized role of men as active leaders was undermined by the circumstances of trench warfare.

The psychological effects of the war contributed to the erosion of masculinity amongst the German soldiers. The heroic men who had gone marching to the front in 1914 stumbled home in 1918, reeling from their defeat. The humiliation of loss would be heightened in 1919 by the addition of the war guilt clause to the Treaty of Versailles. This blow was further exacerbated by the increase of perceived sexual disorders amongst men returning from the front. Medical professionals portrayed returning soldiers as "as sadistic and sexually deviant men who transmitted immorality and brutality learned at the front to German society."[7] This image was promulgated in popular culture. The famous artist Otto Dix, who served as a soldier on the front, drew the disturbing image of a soldier raping a nun, which suggested that the violence of the war was being transposed into the sexual practices of former soldiers.[8] According to Jason Crouthamel's analysis of German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld's study *Sexual History of the World War*, the heightened atmosphere of the front provided an ideal environment for male same-sex acts to be expressed "as a necessary bonding between men."[9] The apparent spread of sadism and homosexuality, resulting from what Hirschfeld had labeled "war neuroses" in his 1941 publication undermined the popular belief that logic and rationale dominated a man's sexual drive.[10] Moreover, Hirschfeld associated the homosexual with a

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[7] Crouthamel, "Male Sexuality and Psychological Trauma," 78.

[8] Apel, "'Heroes' and 'Whores'," 372.

[9] Crouthamel, "Male Sexuality and Psychological Trauma," 72; Magnus Hirschfeld, *Sexual History of the World War,* trans. unknown (New York: Cadillac Publishing Co, 1941).

[10] Ibid., 64-65, 71.

"caretaker who [belonged] in the private sphere…[doing] women's work," serving to further isolate struggling soldiers from an identity of masculine strength.[11] The manifestation of these sexual abnormalities, or at least the perception that such psychological trauma was present amongst veterans, was evidence of the lack of control that German men returning from the front had over their identity. The nature of trench warfare forced men out of their role as leaders and into a position of submissive followers as they waited in the trenches. The same brutality that had forced these men to be passive seemingly damaged a primary psychological and biological function that was an identifiable sign of proper masculinity: their heterosexuality. This psychological trauma was directly correlated to the experience of the war front, which, as stated above, was an atmosphere devoid of women. The increasing insecurity of masculinity in Weimar Germany was rooted in a lack of control that men had over their situation on the front, which was then further eroded by the psychological trauma suffered as a result of the brutality of warfare.

The sense of a lack of control that German men experienced at the front and the challenge to the German definition of masculinity was manifested in visible forms following the Great War. The November Revolution of 1919 resulted in the establishment of a new democratic republic whose inability to maintain political stability resulted in the turnover of

[11] David James Pricket, "The Soldier Figure in Discourses on Masculinity in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany," *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 44, no. 1 (Feb., 2008): 70, http://utpjournals.metapress.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/content/p1n23t1888403127/?genre=article&id=doi%3a10.3138%2fseminar.44.1.68

fourteen different governments between 1920 and 1932.[12] The weakness of the Weimar Republic reflected the weakness of the returning soldiers, as both struggled to establish a strong identity within Germany. The 1920s in Weimar Germany were bookended by hyperinflation and economic depression. As a result, the Mark collapsed in 1923 and the ensuing depression resulted in the unemployment of over six million people by 1932.[13] Therefore, the identity of the man as a breadwinner and provider was threatened in the years following the Great War. The emotional and psychological attacks on German masculinity were now exacerbated by the political and financial threats that were jeopardizing the traditional role that German men had held in society prior to the Great War. These external forces had challenged the ideal of German masculinity without the influence of women. Therefore, the emergence of women into new social positions within Weimar Germany did not create these insecurities, but added further strain to an already fractured male population.

As men became increasingly insecure as their roles changed, they became increasingly aware of the presence of women in the public sphere. The visibility of women in the public sphere can be attributed as a response to the absence of men. Catherine Dollard observes that "women had to do their part to fill the spaces left behind by killed or mutilated men."[14]The

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[12] Ruth Henig, *The Weimar Republic 1919-1933,* (London: Routledge, 1998), 27.

[13] Nicholas H. Dimsdale, Nicholas Horsewood and Arthur van Riel, "Unemployment in Interwar Germany: An Analysis of the Labor Market, 1927-1936," *The Journal of Economic History* 66, no. 3 (Sep., 2006): 778, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3874859.

[14] Catherine Dollard, "Marital Status and the Rhetoric of the Women's Movement in World War I Germany," *Women in German Yearbook* 22 (2006): 223, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688270.

percentage of women in the workforce between 1907 and 1933 increased very slightly from 33.8% to 35.6% of the total female population; however, the percentage of women in white-collar employment, such as office administrative positions, almost doubled between 1907 and 1925.[15] The increase of women in posts traditionally held by men was a response to their absence. Their movement into the public eye was not intended as a challenge to the role of men in society. It was borne out of necessity. However, for defeated soldiers returning home, the increased visibility of women in the public professional sphere was a new and unfamiliar change on the home front. German soldiers had spent the Great War trapped in their trenches, while women had gone out into society and actively participated in the economy. While this new phenomenon was not a causal factor for male anxieties, the appearance of women in white-collar employment contributed to uncertainties about the shifting roles of both men and women in Weimar Germany.

McCormick examines Weimar filmography in order to identify the "destabilization" that women seemingly represented; namely, they were portrayed as a threat to the "stable, rational, scientific modernity" that was associated with the ideal male identity".[16] However, the unstable nature of the Weimar Republic was a result of the actions and policies of men. The Great War had been started, fought, and ended by men. The resulting psychological and social trauma that occurred originated in the trenches, a place completely devoid of women. The fractured governments of the Weimar Republic that were unable to steer Germany out of economic disaster were all led by men. As the

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[15] Günter Berghaus, "Girlkultur: Feminism, Americanism, and Popular Entertainment in Weimar Germany," *Journal of Design History* 1, no. 3/4 (1988): 193 & 195, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1315711.

[16] McCormick, "Private Anxieties/Public Projections," 8.

roles of men in the Weimar Republic were being challenged due to economic crises, a 'New Woman' emerged, one who had achieved "economic independence…through gainful employment."[17] Moreover, this 'New Woman' adopted a more traditionally masculine appearance. Gunter Berthas describes her as having a "garcon-like figure" and "bobbed hair."[18] This new type of femininity embodied traditional elements of masculinity, from their physical image to their role in the public sphere. The emergence of the 'New Woman' in Weimar Germany can therefore be seen as a response to the weakness of German men and to the fractured, unpredictable nature of society in the Weimar Republic. This modern femininity coincided with the decline of conventional masculinity. The blossoming of the modern woman in the Weimar Republic can be attributed to the physical vacancies left by deaths of thousands of German soldiers, as well as the ideological and psychological changes resulting from the Great War. This strong and unfamiliar woman did not begin to undermine the sense of identity for German men; their weakened position within Weimar society provided room for her to grow. In 1929, writer Elsa Herman stated "the woman of today [was] oriented exclusively toward the present."[19] After the Great War, it was apparent that the future was unpredictable and the return of psychologically traumatized soldiers indicated that the traditional structure and roles of German society were

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[17] Elsa Herrmann, 1929, "This is the New Woman," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook,* ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, (1994): Source accessed at *German History in Documents and Images* database, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=4779.

[18] Berghaus, "Girlkultur," 210.

[19] Elsa Herrmann, 1929, "This is the New Woman," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook,* ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, (1994): Source accessed at *German History in Documents and Images* database, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=4779.

uncertain, and it was in this environment that the 'New Woman' flourished. The gender insecurities that German men wrestled with were not caused by the emergence of a new masculine woman. The traditional understanding of a German male identity had already deteriorated as a result of the barbarity of the Great War, its psychological effects, and the socio-economic factors in the Weimar Republic in the post-war years. The evolution of the 'New Woman' was a reaction to this deterioration and, while the ascendency of a new kind of femininity heightened the insecurities of men the Weimar Republic, the 'New Woman' was not the cause of male anxieties over gender roles.

This is not to say that men did not have anxieties about the changing roles of men and women in Weimar Germany. However, their fears were not simply a response to a new strong woman. Their fears stemmed from the erosion of their own identity, which in turn was exacerbated by the change in women's roles and identities. During the Great War, German soldiers were confined to their own private sphere in the trenches, forced to wait as modern technology replaced hand-to-hand combat with anonymous killing through shellfire. The unexpected violence and carnage in the war was seen to have disturbed 'healthy' male sexuality, which only served to emphasize the belief that that the idealized and promulgated concept of German masculinity, as discussed earlier, was shifting. These insecurities were fostered in male-dominated surroundings; the disintegration of the traditional definition of German masculinity occurred in the absence of females. The humiliation of defeat furthered their insecurity, as the image of the heroic German soldier disseminated through society was shattered. Practically, the typical role of men in society was challenged by the economic catastrophes of postwar Germany, which combined with the effects of the Great War to undermine the traditional identity of German men. The

appearance of women in the public view, and the emergence of a new type of femininity, was not the causes of male gender anxieties in the Weimar Republic. Male gender anxieties in the Weimar Republic began with the erosion of traditional male roles and identities as a result of the external forces of war, barbarity, and postwar political and economic instability. An unfamiliar and independent woman emerged in the Weimar Republic in response to the economic and social voids created by the destabilizing of the traditional order of society in Germany. The 'New Woman' did not cause the gender anxieties that McCormick observes in the cultural media of 'New Objectivity'; her emergence was in conjunction with the decline of the conventional definition of masculinity.

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