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## The ‘Private’ became ‘Public’: Wives as Denouncers in the Third Reich

Feminist historians have so far projected the ‘Aryan’ family as a ‘doll’s house of *ersatz* goodness’, as an institution which acted like ‘a shield against all-pervasive Nazi ideology’. Some have even declared all housewives and mothers innocent and ignorant of Nazi crimes. They assert that the ‘Aryan’ family remained a unified front unaffected by the destructive politics of the era. Such interpretations ignore the fact that the regime managed to intrude into family life and sniff out dissent from within this personal sphere by a number of means, including the provision of political denunciation. A view from below, in addition, suggests that this intrusion was made possible with the active co-operation of spouses, particularly wives.<sup>1</sup> This important gender behaviour has, however, neither been properly thematized nor quantitatively researched.

This article sets out to do just that, using mainly Gestapo case files of private individuals housed in the State Archives of Düsseldorf as the primary source. Obviously, the archival cataloguing of cards — some 70,00 altogether — did not betray who was denounced, let alone by whom. So, a sampling method had to be found to select the cards. I chose to restrict myself to the city of Düsseldorf for its cosmopolitan, politically multicoloured and textured profile. The *Ortskartei* Düsseldorf contained some 6759 cards, which were divided into 52 categories of ‘offences’. To investigate the issue of racial other-

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1 This phenomenon is pointed out by some historians in their studies of denunciation. For example, R. Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society* (Oxford 1990), 147–9; idem, ‘Denunciations in Twentieth-Century Germany’ in *Journal of Modern History*, 68 (1996), 931–67; R. Grüneberg, *Das zwölfjährige Reich* (Munich 1977), 119–21; Dieter W. Rockenmaier, *Denunzianten: 47 Fallgeschichten aus den Akten der Gestapo im NS-Gau Mainfranken* (Würzburg 1998), 67–76; K. Dördelmann, *Die Macht der Wörter* (Cologne 1997), 107–20; K. Dördelmann, ‘“Aus einer gewissen Empörung habe ich nun Anzeige erstattet”. Verhalten und Motive von Denunziantinnen’ in K. Heinsohn et al. (eds), *Zwischen Karriere und Verfolgung* (Frankfurt 1997), 195–6; R. Wolters, *Verrat für die Volksgemeinschaft: Denunziantinnen im Dritten Reich* (Pfaffenweiler 1996), 59; K.M. Mallmann, ‘Zwischen Denunziation und Roter Hilfe’ in C. Wickert (ed.), *Frauen gegen die Diktatur — Widerstand und Verfolgung im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland* (Berlin 1995), 90–2; G. Paul and K.M. Mallmann, ‘Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent? Gestapo, Society and Resistance’ in David F. Crew (ed.), *Nazism and German Society 1933–1945* (London 1994), 180.

ing, I selected cards from 'Jewry' (not considered here for lack of space), 'foreign workers' and 'foreign minorities'. To examine the issue of gendered othering, and perhaps gender conflict, I concentrated on two numerically rich categories, namely the 'Communist Party of Germany' (containing 1367 cards) and the 'Law Against Malicious Gossip' (containing 700 cards). Once the categories were decided, cards were picked on a random sampling basis.<sup>2</sup> In addition, available Special Court judgments — in individual cases — have been included here.

While collecting my samples, I rarely came across a case where a husband denounced his wife, while denunciation by wives was a thread that ran through almost all selected categories of 'offences'. These denunciations opened a window into the house of 'ersatz idealism kept insulated from the inhuman outside world of violence and horror' as portrayed by Claudia Koonz. While attributing guilt to ordinary women in their 'separate sphere', Koonz argued that 'mothers and wives . . . made a vital contribution to Nazi power by preserving the illusion of love in an environment of hatred'.<sup>3</sup> This thesis is questioned by the findings presented here, which suggest that the possibility of political denunciation unleashed its own dynamics of power equations in conjugal life in an unprecedented manner. It enabled women to work against the stereotypical image of subservient wives and passive accomplices of their husbands. Women also made a vital contribution to Nazi power, not so much through 'preserving the illusion of love' as through making their disillusionment public. The 'environment of hatred' rubbed off on them too, and they became very much a part of it. The very notion of the family as a 'safe haven' was turned upside down by these disgruntled wives. The 'healthy Aryan' family was not an ideal retreat for patriarchs. For many it was a battlefield, where spouses were continually at loggerheads. In denunciation reports one reads of housewives denouncing their husbands for political crime, but with strong reference to the everyday dramas of conjugal life.

It is crucial at the outset to consider the nature of these denunciation reports. There was no uniform pattern. Sometimes they were well thought-out written statements on husbands' behaviour, reflecting a cool and calculating mind and making it fairly transparent what the denouncer planned to achieve. At other times, they were accounts of events narrated to the Gestapo on the spur of the moment. Such oral reports were mediated through the pen of the Gestapo functionary. Although the documents might have resulted from a question-and-answer session, they were presented as uninterrupted narratives. Often

2 For this article, I have drawn my stories from about 150 samples (20 per cent) from the category Law Against Malicious Gossip, 68 samples (5 per cent) from Communist Party of Germany, 34 samples (50 per cent) from Racially Foreign Workers and 5 samples (33 per cent) from Racially Foreign Minorities.

3 Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland. Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (New York 1987), 17.

sentences were broken or incorrect and words were missing, reflecting the tensions and dilemmas of an accuser who ran to report a matter at once. They were intermingled with words and phrases typical of the Gestapo, making a true verbatim account difficult to find. The Gestapo seemed mainly interested in extracting the political contents from the reporter, but it is clear that the accuser narrated what she wished to, which was often more personal. Hence, the documents that were processed by the political police turned out to have more social context than one might expect, albeit laced with politics and ideology. Other supplementary documents providing additional information on a particular case include subsequent hearings, interrogations, clarifications and investigation reports of the Gestapo.

The accuser, in these reports the wife, normally portrayed herself as a responsible mother, a well-meaning and dutiful wife in search of justice, and justice at any cost. Often she presented herself as a politically correct National Socialist, particularly in cases where the husband was a serious political offender like a communist, or a racial enemy like a Pole. The husband was projected as an insolent, irresponsible and aggressive patriarch. The battered wife often requested the Gestapo to keep the information secret for fear of further violence. Some even suggested that the husband should be told only after being put behind bars or in a concentration camp.

The accused normally started on a defensive note. He was often aware that he had been denounced by his wife. He disputed the charges levelled by her as personally motivated, which it was easier to do if there were no ready witnesses. A husband accused of violent behaviour at home denied beating his wife, or admitted hitting her only when provoked or under the influence of alcohol, but neither regularly nor so badly as to cause permanent damage or serious physical injury. He often alleged that his wife simply wanted to get rid of him because she had someone else.

Having considered the documents, we now present some case studies categorized on the basis of the actual motive behind the denunciation.

This section deals with case files of men whose wives used denunciation as a defence against domestic violence in the hope of somehow bringing the situation under control. Under the pretext of denouncing their husbands' politically-deviant behaviour, they called upon an outside agency to intervene in their domestic conflict and relieve them of their husbands' constant aggression. The abstract authority of the Führer, embodied in the form of such 'disciplining' bodies like the Gestapo, was evoked to counter the authority of spouses, an authority that was more real, personal and omnipresent in their everyday lives. Women's perception of the state and the Führer was refracted through their subjective experiences of gender oppression within the family. In a 'crisis situation' they sought to appropriate the much-propagated 'Führer Prinzip' for their domestic matters. Nazi rhetoric promised to restore the dignity and respect of the housewife and mother within the family, and these

wives urged the state and its agencies to put such promises into practice. In return, they acted as 'loyal citizens' of the Fatherland by reporting their husbands' politically-deviant behaviour.

In most cases a set pattern could be discerned. The women's reports fell into two parts. They started with the erring behaviour of their husbands that led to regular quarrels at home, often ending up in bouts of physical violence against family members. This was the main reason for reporting them. It was followed by the other reason, which was political. Here, the husbands were portrayed as enemies of the state, regularly cursing the state and its leaders. The basic information, therefore, was presented in a camouflaged manner with the husbands labelled as opponents of the state. There was thus an underlying wish for emancipation, or at least an alleviation from suffering, which was expressed in an 'inverted manner'. This behaviour was a kind of 'inverted emancipation', whereby the real agenda wore the garb of a more politically 'appropriate' one. We turn now to some examples.

*Case 1.* This was an oral report filed by Frau Hof at the office of the Police Chief, Düsseldorf, that found its way into the Gestapo records on 10 June 1939.<sup>4</sup> The text contained grammatical errors and the language was not very refined,<sup>5</sup> which was to be expected of a working-class woman. It read:

This report concerns my husband. I am forced to take this step as I see no other way out. I have been married to him since 1926. I have been fond of my husband though he used to drink a lot, which he continues to do even today. Soon after our marriage, he told me one day, 'I have not married you to feed you, you lazy sow! Go and work!' For the sake of peace, I took up a cleaning job. Before I got to know him, he had lived with a whore. He looks at all women as whores and sows, and sees me the same way. I have only recently learnt that he lived with such a woman. He also has a venereal disease. He himself never told me all this, when we got married. He often beat me up. He has [politically] always been left-oriented, now even more so than earlier. I have reported him to the health authorities to find out if he still suffers from the disease, but to date I do not know the status. On 12 May he beat me again and on 6 June he beat me half dead. . . . I have filed a divorce case against him and have also enclosed the statement of the doctor.

And now to the main point: he is left-oriented. I cannot take it any longer. He always curses the government. He says that he would never become a National Socialist. He has a loaded pistol and often threatens to shoot. On 6 June, when he beat me, he took out the burning coal from the fireplace and wanted to set the house on fire. He wanted to kill me. . . .

The Gestapo enquiry confirmed that Herr Hof had kept his wife in the dark about his promiscuous relations and venereal disease. Frau Hof learned the truth from other people in 1937. Since then regular fights had broken out between husband and wife and had become more and more violent, especially when she refused to have sexual intercourse with him. However, the Gestapo 'could not establish' his political crime because he had made the alleged derogatory statements only in front of his wife and they could not be supported by other witnesses. The Gestapo saw the political accusations as 'per-

4 HStAD RW/58-13944.

5 This translated version has corrected these flaws to make the reading smooth.

sonally motivated' and thought that Frau Hof had just wanted to get rid of her husband. In his defence Herr Hof told the Gestapo that the report filed by his wife was an act of revenge. He denied having beaten her. He only 'grabbed her tightly' whenever she denied him sexual contact. Because of this he suspected that she had another man and was looking for reasons to get rid of him. He also said that when Frau Hof had filed for divorce on grounds of ill-treatment and the court had ordered him to leave the house, she had asked him to stay.

The Gestapo dismissed the case after giving Herr Hof a warning. In addition, he was fined ten Marks for being in possession of an unauthorized weapon, and a communication was sent to the health authorities to deal with the complaint about his venereal disease.

This denunciation was not the result of any political conviction. The denouncer did not belong to the Nazi Party. The option of denouncing Herr Hof was not a first means but a last resort. Before taking this step, Frau Hof had tried other ways of living in peace with her husband, like going out to work and putting up with constant physical and verbal abuse. It was not just a matter of 'getting rid' of her husband as both he and the Gestapo claimed. The situation was more complex. She was caught in a love-hate situation. Hof himself admitted that she had filed a divorce suit and sought physical protection from him. But when he had prepared to leave, she had stopped him. This story is a typical one of an oppressed wife yearning for love, care and respect from her husband. Herr Hof hurt her dignity and self-respect but she put up with it until she realized that he had cheated on her. Her conjugal life came under fire as she learned about his past and its legacy, namely the venereal disease. She could no longer go on making peace and reported him to the health authorities. The subsequent beating and bullying by her husband traumatized her and led her to resort to police protection.

In this case, Frau Hof's body became the site of power relations, of domination and subordination in conjugal life. Interestingly, it was also the site of gender resistance and subversion. Herr Hof's statement showed clearly that it was Frau Hof's denial of access to her body which provoked him to beat her up. Physical violence thus became the ultimate assertion of masculine power. At this point she sought the intervention of the nazi authorities to 'discipline and punish' her husband on two levels. On one level, she invited the intervention of medical authorities to examine her sexually-diseased husband, and on another, she asked the political police to put her home 'in order' by disciplining her morally-erring, drunk and violent husband. Reporting her sexually-diseased husband to the health authorities might have helped the regime in implementing its eugenic policies as much as it helped her out of the 'sexual disorder' at home. While most of the eugenic and racist policies regarding abortion, sterilization and anti-natalism might have had a more damaging impact on the affected women, as Gisela Bock argues,<sup>6</sup> even here there was

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6 Gisela Bock, 'Antinatalism, Maternity and Paternity in National Socialist Racism' in David F. Crew (ed.), *Nazism and German Society* (London 1994), 113–20.

some scope for women to exercise control over their bodies — denial of sexual contact — and over those of their husbands, if the latter proved to be sexually unfit for intercourse and reproduction. Frau Hof punished her husband for violating her body by making his body vulnerable to eugenic measures. Here the ideology of a healthy *Volkskörper* proved useful.

Sexual disease<sup>7</sup> or sexual deviance was a motivating factor in many of the denunciations. When the husband was considered morally or ‘racially dangerous’, the intervention of the Gestapo was sought to stop the relationship immediately.

*Case 2.* Fred’s wife denounced him for indulging in malicious gossip. She also stated that he put pressure on her to vote communist before the seizure of power.<sup>8</sup> We can only speculate whether Fred’s wife denounced him for seditious activities alone, as the denunciation report was missing from the file, and the Gestapo report stated that the accused was in judicial custody for committing incest with his daughter. While the charges of malicious gossip and communist leanings were dropped for lack of evidence, he was sentenced to four years’ penal servitude for incest, and castration was also ordered. His criminal record revealed that he was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment for raping a French woman in the first world war.<sup>9</sup>

At the core of such denunciations lay the concept of ‘official’ deviance and the varied interpretations of it by the accuser. The regime demanded that all kinds of political ‘deviance’ be reported. However, the perceptions of the people, here especially of wives, sometimes differed from those of the state as to what they considered deviant. For them, husbands’ sexual or moral deviance was equally or perhaps more worth reporting. Alcoholism, domestic violence, sexual disease and misbehaviour on the part of the husband were, therefore, packaged together with his political deviance, thus making the husband out to be a deviant on all fronts. Even when wives could not convince the Gestapo of the political problems of their husbands, they hoped to consolidate their case by depicting them as deviants in other spheres.

In the above cases the charges of malicious gossip against the husbands were dismissed by the Gestapo on the grounds that the alleged derogatory statements were not made by the accused ‘in public’. Further, given the circumstances, there was no fear that they would enter the public sphere.<sup>10</sup> Besides, in

7 Dördelmann cites a similar case from Cologne of a violent husband whose wife was compelled to denounce him for anti-regime activities after he passed on his venereal disease to her. Dördelmann, *Die Macht der Wörter*, op. cit., 110–11.

8 HStAD RW/58-6475.

9 On rape and the impregnation of French women by German soldiers see Ruth Harris, ‘The “Child of the Barbarian”: Rape, Race and Nationalism in France during the First World War’ in *Past and Present*, 141 (November 1993), 170–206.

10 While promulgating the Law Against Malicious Gossip, the state emphasized that the offence of the ‘public expression’ of anti-state or anti-party views should be taken seriously. Even the circumstances and the place where such views were expressed were taken into consideration to determine if they could later threaten to become public. The case files often give this as a reason

cases where spouses denounced each other the Gestapo suspected ulterior motives and did not take the denouncer's accusations at face value, especially those of a wife. However, it was not so easy for a husband to escape the clutches of the Gestapo if the wife could rally neighbours or relations behind her cause.

*Case 3.* Frau Kremer, a battered wife, was encouraged by her neighbours to report her husband. While the menacing attitude of the aggressive and irresponsible breadwinner was a constant source of trouble for the family, his political views might have been provocative for an enthusiastic nazi neighbour. Herr Kremer was denounced, once by a neighbour in 1936 and once by his wife in 1939, for indulging in malicious gossip.<sup>11</sup> Frau Kremer's denunciation was made through the cell leader, who produced a sworn statement by Frau Kremer, testifying that her husband was opposed to the state. The Gestapo called Frau Kremer in for further enquiries. She stood by her testimony and named her neighbour, an air raid shelter warden, Herr Kaufmann, as a witness. Kaufmann supported her accusations and added his own version of Kremer's seditious statements. He also bore witness to the fact that Kremer beat his wife regularly and that she had taken refuge in his house on several occasions. Once Kaufmann's wife had an argument about this with Kremer, who retorted that he would beat his wife as long as he wished.

Under pressure, Herr Kremer confessed to his left leanings. He also admitted to once having hit his wife, from whom he was sure the denunciation came. Although he denied having voiced any anti-regime sentiments in either public or private, the statements of the pro-regime neighbours were found to be more 'reliable' and Kremer was sent to gaol for a year and four months. In his appeal for mercy, Kremer promised that he would act as a responsible breadwinner in future.

*Case 4.* In the case of Frau Wolf, the Gestapo entered the scene to play the role of protecting patron of the battered wife, who sent her daughter to the police station to file the report while her husband was beating her.<sup>12</sup> The copy of the arrest warrant said that on the night of 10 March 1941, Frau Wolf's daughter came and requested help from the police as Wolf was threatening his wife with a knife and making anti-nazi statements. By the time the police reached the house, Wolf had left. After some time he came back and started quarrelling with his wife again. As he was drunk, he was taken into custody by the uniformed police to protect the family. The case was then handed over to the Gestapo who summoned Frau Wolf the same day to report on the political views of her husband. She obliged the Gestapo with more details and said that her daughter could bear witness. The Gestapo summoned the adolescent stepdaughter of the accused, and she told them that she had woken up in the

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for dismissal or further investigation of a case. See also Bernward Dörner, 'Heimtücke'. *Das Gesetz als Waffe* (Paderborn 1998), 19–22.

11 HStAD RW/58-25380.

12 HStAD RW/58-65726.

middle of the night to hear loud sounds and abuse. She heard her stepfather fighting with her mother. He was cursing the government, which provoked her mother to say that she would report him. This enraged him and he took out a knife, threatening to kill her if she dared betray him. When the daughter came out to intervene, her mother urged her to rush to the police station and report the matter.

Herr Wolf contested all the allegations made by his wife and claimed that she was hysterical and threw fits on the slightest pretext. They did not get along well. He assumed that she must have twisted his words. He admitted having returned home in an inebriated state and having had an argument with her. He could not remember exactly what he had said, but denied having said anything against the state. He could not remember when or why he took out the knife, although he had one in his hand, but swore that he was just intimidating her and had no intention of injuring her.

The Gestapo released Herr Wolf in the evening after giving him a warning because there had been ‘allegations and denials’. The daughter was considered only a partial witness to the event. Therefore, his political crime was considered ‘insufficiently proven’. His weapon was confiscated and the case file was closed.

The above cases suggest that the Gestapo was not dealing with hard-core political crimes, but basically disposing of civil and social matters by using its discretion and figuring as a conflict resolution agency, albeit with a male bias. It judged erring, oppressive or drunk husbands with compassion. Such behaviour might have been typical of working-class men, and many of the functionaries who dealt with such cases might have found themselves in the same situation at home. In the case of battered women, the black-and-white categories of perpetrator and victim seemed to become blurred. The violence of husbands under the influence of alcohol, which often created an atmosphere of terror, was overlooked by the Gestapo, who dismissed such cases with a cursory comment like ‘there is no reason for pursuing this case’ or ‘the husband’s act does not constitute a “political offence”’ etc., and the case was closed.

We shall now consider the case of divorced wives.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, many women who were *already* separated or divorced from their husbands did not hesitate to denounce their husbands.<sup>14</sup> The Gestapo files give useful insights

13 Gellately referred to this phenomenon in passing in one of his articles: ‘Denunciations might also be made when a divorce was already under way, or when it recently had been granted. The personal aims in such cases ran from seeking material advantage to gaining emotional revenge.’ See Gellately, ‘Denunciations in Twentieth-Century Germany’, *op. cit.*, 945–6. He cited many such cases from Gestapo files but did not go into the details. One suspects that such denunciations have come mostly from female spouses who sought material advantages and emotional revenge. Our cases in this section explore this phenomenon in depth and prove such a suspicion to be correct.

14 I wanted to study the divorce case proceedings of these couples to understand this phenomenon better and applied to the *Landgericht* Düsseldorf archives for permission. Unfortunately, the archives had destroyed all the records including the year 1943 and my case studies do not go beyond this year.

into this phenomenon, revealing that not only were the majority of denunciation cases filed by women but also that it was mostly women who filed divorce suits.<sup>15</sup> The most frequently-cited reason for wanting a divorce was the violent character of the husband. While in most cases the husband was found to be the guilty party<sup>16</sup> and the divorce was granted, this was not enough for some wives, who sought revenge on their husbands through the Gestapo. The ex-husband's often crude ways of subjugating his wife were countered by the wife in almost equally crude ways years afterwards.

*Case 1.* Frau Paul, upon learning that her husband had been interrogated by the Gestapo for maintaining contact with foreign workers, wrote to the Gestapo on 21 July 1943 that her husband continued to do so.<sup>17</sup> She added that she had divorced her husband because he used to beat her ruthlessly and regularly. Frau Paul was summoned by the Gestapo for a hearing soon after, and in her testimony she first talked about her unhappy marriage. She reiterated that after seven months of marriage she had divorced her husband because of his violence towards her, and even towards her mother. She felt mentally and physically let down to such an extent that it was no longer possible for her to go on living with him. She emphasized that the report filed by her was not an act of revenge, and concluded by saying that she could swear upon her testimony and repeat it if required.

Herr Paul denied the political charges levelled against him by his wife and said that he had severed all contacts with foreign workers after his first warning. He held his wife responsible for falsely accusing him and stated that she had told him a few days before that she would be happy if he ended up in a concentration camp. The Gestapo decided not to pursue the matter as the reason for the report was the wife's hatred of her husband. He was left alone after being given another warning.

15 To see if some resemblance can be found between our stories and the Reichwide gender pattern of divorce, it is useful to cite divorce statistics. From 1938/39 to 1943, 94,882 divorces were granted in which the husband was the guilty party as compared to 62,740 women, on the grounds of serious negligent matrimonial offences. On the grounds of adultery, 20,960 men and 19,715 women were divorced. For irretrievable breakdown as grounds for divorce 14,278 men and only 850 women were declared the guilty party. Source: Gabriella Czarnowski, 'The value of marriage for the *Volksgemeinschaft*': Policies towards Women and Marriage under National Socialism' in Richard Bessel (ed.), *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Comparisons and Contrasts* (Cambridge 1996), 94–112, here 107. These figures correspond to ours, where wives appear as the aggrieved and innocent party much more frequently.

16 The guilt principle was introduced in the divorce law in 1900, and continued in the Third Reich. The court investigated who bore the major part of guilt in the break-up of a marriage. It was crucial, especially for housewives, to be declared the innocent party in their divorce judgments, for any alimony claims depended upon it. For more details see Cosima Königs, *Die Frau im Recht des Nationalsozialismus. Eine Analyse ihrer familien-,erb- und arbeitsrechtlichen Stellung* (Frankfurt/M. 1988), 55ff.; G. Czarnowski, op. cit., 104–10.

17 HStAD RW/58-53915. Illegal contact with foreigners and prisoners of war became a new mass crime after 1940. In the summer of 1942 around 80 per cent of all arrests made by the Gestapo were for this offence. See Ulrich Herbert, *Fremdarbeiter. Politik und Praxis des 'Ausländereinsatzes' in der Kriegswirtschaft des Dritten Reiches* (Berlin 1985), especially the section 'Verbotener Umgang' als Massendilekt', 122–9.

One explanation for a divorcee's denouncing her ex-husband was that not all links were severed between the couple, especially in cases where the husband was paying alimony. Such husbands continued to exert an influence on their families, which was countered by their wives through denunciation. The following example illustrates this.

*Case 2.* Frau Schmidt, a divorced wife, rallied a whole bandwagon of relations and acquaintances as witnesses to ensure that her husband did not have an easy time with the Gestapo. The report, dated 12 July 1940, stated that Herr Schmidt, who was of Polish origin, cursed the state and listened to foreign radio broadcasts.<sup>18</sup> Her witnesses included a neighbouring couple, a woman neighbour, her son (Schmidt's stepson) and his girlfriend. The neighbours' statements revealed that Frau Schmidt was on friendly terms with them. They all had something to report against her ex-husband. Herr Schmidt's stepson's girlfriend was Polish, but she was declared 'capable of Germanization' and lent credibility to Frau Schmidt's accusations by bearing witness to Schmidt's anti-German statements.

In his defence, Herr Schmidt presented himself as a responsible divorcee who 'laid his weekly salary before his wife on the table'. He felt that it was his moral right to tell his family what he considered 'right' and 'wrong'. He said that he was being victimized by the mother and son because he objected to the 'immoral relations' between his stepson and the latter's girlfriend, whom he had banned from the house, an act which had prompted them to denounce him.

The Gestapo made enquiries at his workplace about his political credibility. A note dated 26 August 1940 said that the factory head of the German Labour Front considered Schmidt a good worker. Despite this, the Gestapo did not consider his own testimony valid because of his Polish origins and he was found 'untrustworthy'. A case was filed against him in the special court and he was sentenced to six months' imprisonment. This was a classic case of a wife's taking advantage of her position as a mother, and successfully using her son as a witness to get rid of her 'interfering' ex-husband. It is worth noting that Frau Schmidt's son's Polish girlfriend sided with the denouncer. Apart from being emotionally involved with a German, she was a beneficiary of the system. She would not have wanted to be thought sympathetic to the pro-Polish views of the accused, since this could have led to her 'degermanization'. The case demonstrated how compliance with the regime worked on various levels.

*Case 3.* Recently-separated Frau Bauer appeared at the Gestapo office on 16 January 1936. She accused her husband and her father-in-law of communist activity, alleging that they both listened to the Moscow bulletin and sang the 'Internationale' with clenched fists. Frau Bauer's report also mentioned that she had filed a divorce suit. Now that she had returned to her parents' house, her father, a Nazi Party member, told her that she was 'duty bound' to report

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18 HStAD RW/58-24739. For the same individual there exists a file with Special Court's Judgment in Schloß Kalkum, Reference: Ger. Rep. 114/ Nr. 1737.

her husband and father-in-law for their political activities.<sup>19</sup> The information given by the denouncer was verified to police satisfaction. The Gestapo's investigation report also revealed that Frau Bauer's father-in-law had earlier been penalized on charges of theft. His case was referred to the *Oberlandsgericht Hamm* for high treason and he was sentenced to two years' imprisonment.<sup>20</sup>

There were also wives who were involved with other men. These women found denunciation the best and quickest means of getting rid of their husbands. Had they resorted to divorce they would have risked being declared the guilty party. Interestingly, however, they let their lovers take the lead, while they appeared as accomplices or witnesses in this game.

*Case 1.* Norman, a Polish hairdresser, who ran his own salon, was denounced simultaneously by a female friend of his live-in partner, Melanie, and his helper, Baum, in September 1939.<sup>21</sup> Curiously, the first report was not taken up by the Gestapo but the later one filed by the victim's helper, in which the main witness was Melanie, was taken seriously. Baum portrayed Norman as a thankless Pole who, after deserting from the Polish army, had been living and earning his bread in Germany. Norman swore his loyalty to Poland. Ever since Germany had declared war on Poland, Norman had been cursing Hitler and the Germans. Baum named Melanie, Norman's live-in partner, as a witness.

Melanie's statement to the Gestapo read as follows:

I came to know the barber Norman around eight years back. A love relationship developed between us, and I told him that I already had a son out of wedlock. We had plans to marry, but they could not be realised as Norman was already married and his wife lived in Poland. At our present address we have a common house. I have rented it, and I sublet it further to tenants. Norman has set up a salon there where he works with his assistant Baum. . . . From the beginning, I have known him as a Pole from the heart and soul. Ever since the German troops marched into Poland, Norman is mad with anger. He is out of his wits and does not know how to let out his wrath. My son and I who live with him are the ones who have to bear the brunt. Norman has been listening to foreign broadcasts to keep himself informed of the political situation. When I requested him to stop it, he said that they, at least, reported the reality. The German bulletins and newspapers told lies. Though he is aware of the fact that listening to foreign bulletins is banned, he continues to do so. When my son and I warn him, he turns mean and cheap. I would also like to point out in this context that the accused is very dangerous and does not hold back from acts of violence. I have had to experience this many times in my life. Norman is filled with so much hatred for the Führer that he says things like, 'The Führer and his cronies should rot and be hacked into pieces. All Germans should rot'. . . . I have repeatedly been threatened with beatings by Norman whenever I interfered. Expressions like 'You German pig! you fanatic German pig!' are a part of his everyday vocabulary. . . . In the end, I would like to request you to keep my statement confidential, till he is taken into custody. Otherwise, as I have already pointed out, my son and I will fall prey to his violence and fury.

19 HStAD RW/58-50182.

20 Wives seeking divorce also denounced their husbands for communist activities in the hope of getting a favourable decision from the court; e.g. HStAD RW/58-29439.

21 HStAD RW/58-25088. Schloß Kalkum reference: Ger. Rep. 114 Nr. 1460.

On 20 September 1939, the accused was arrested. He was forced to confess his pro-Polish leanings but added that he had no criminal record in Poland or elsewhere. He explained the reason for his denunciation as follows:

I have been told about the accusation levelled against me. The only thing that I have to say is that I have fallen prey to an intrigue. I have been noticing for quite some time that Melanie and Baum enjoy intimate relations. She has gone out with him many times and he has been in our house in my absence. . . . Once I came home unexpectedly and appeared on the scene when they were in their real element. Naturally I was enraged to see this. For this reason, I barred Baum from my house. . . . All that is alleged against me is fabricated and intentionally done to get me out of Melanie's way. Melanie's son is influenced by his mother. I request you to interrogate my other tenants in this matter.

Melanie went to the Gestapo office on the two days following Norman's arrest to tell more tales of his 'seditious' attitude. His case was transferred to the Special Court, which sentenced him to one year and six months' imprisonment on charges of listening to enemy broadcasts<sup>22</sup> and indulging in malicious gossip. After his release, he was again taken into custody on 20 March 1941 and transferred to Buchenwald concentration camp on 9 June 1941. Thereafter there is no information as to what happened to him.

Needless to say, Norman's story was not believed by the Gestapo. His Polish status and obvious sympathies for Poland sealed his fate. Even though a clear private motive for denouncing him can be found in the file, the Gestapo did not consider it relevant and found the denouncer and his witnesses more 'trustworthy'.<sup>23</sup>

*Case 2.* The next case is interesting because the motive for denouncing was not very clear. The story was important because it highlighted how the regime could radically change relationships. Frau Schumacher, working for a local Nazi Party newspaper, the *Rheinische Landeszeitung*, made the following statements against her husband, a construction worker.<sup>24</sup>

My husband comes home drunk at least thrice a week and starts abusing the government. On Friday and Sunday too, he came drunk. I told him that he should let me sleep, as I have to get up at 5 am to distribute the newspaper. He retorted, 'you work for the "Hurenblatt" (whores' paper). The whole government is a bunch of whores.' He often expressed his sympathies for Russia and said he would go to Russia. He makes such statements even when he is sober.

Frau Schumacher thought that he should be sent to a concentration camp. When she noticed that her complaint had fallen on deaf ears, she went to the Gestapo office again to give more information on her husband's anti-regime behaviour.

22 Joseph Goebbels' 'exceptional radio measures', issued on 1 September 1939, forbade listening to all foreign radio broadcasts; appeals were then made to the public to report anyone who defied the ban. Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society*, op. cit., 140.

23 HStAD RW/58-26802 provides another similar case where an Aryan wife acts as an accomplice to get rid of her Polish husband.

24 HStAD RW/58-66223.

Frau Schumacher may have been a new and enthusiastic convert to nazi ideology, but the real motive for her zeal to have her husband punished was not clear from the file and the Gestapo did not make further enquiries. The accused's past record showed that he had been imprisoned in 1907, 1910 and 1923 for a period of six months and a day altogether, and also fined 6 Marks for various cases of theft. He had been a member of the Communist Party before 1933. Herr Schumacher said in his defence that his wife must have twisted his words and besides, he had been drunk when he had made these 'derogatory' statements. He promised to be more careful with his words in future.

Although not many details of the domestic world of the couple were available, it seemed like one of those families whose lives had been radically altered by the last phase of the economic crisis when people shifted loyalties from one party to another. While Herr Schumacher chose to march with the communists, Frau Schumacher was carried away by the nazis. Once the latter came to power, she got a job with a party newspaper, which reinforced party values and teachings. Although political conviction does not seem to explain the whole story, we can only speculate on other possible reasons. One thing was clear: she wanted to get rid of her husband. However, the case was dismissed by the Gestapo and her mission failed.

We now take up the third aspect of the story, namely the attitude of the Gestapo. This was quite important in the final analysis because it played a crucial role in deciding the fate of the accused.

The willingness to accuse a spouse alarmed both the Gestapo and the Reich Justice Ministry. In the war years, when the strain of separation and general conditions of war placed an increased burden on marriages, steps had to be taken. On 24 February 1941, Gestapo headquarters in Berlin sent a letter to all local Gestapo posts concerning the matter of relatives, particularly married couples.<sup>25</sup> That such cases were not isolated was made clear later by the circular letters sent to local judges by the Minister of Justice, Thierack. On 1 November 1944 he wrote to the judges about how they should react in different cases where either husband or wife denounced the spouse. He pointed out that there was no generalized duty to denounce whenever there was a suspicion of a crime and that the state did not demand breach of the marriage trust as a matter of routine. In some instances, such as milder crimes, the community had a 'fundamentally greater interest' in the 'continued maintenance of the mutual trust of the married couple'.<sup>26</sup>

Even though the official line pointed out the urgency of reporting only 'serious political offences' in this context, our study tells us that 'racial

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25 Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society*, op. cit., 147–9.

26 Heinz Boberach (ed.), *Richerterbriefe: Dokumente zur Beeinflussung der deutschen Rechtssprechung 1942–1944* (Boppard 1975), 363 ff.

deviance' was treated more harshly. The example of Norman, a Pole, shows that whether the alleged crime was proved or not, or whether or not there was a clear 'personal motive' behind the denunciation, he had to reckon with harsh measures. An 'Aryan' could hope to get away if his wife was the sole accuser and there were no other witnesses. A 'clean past record', a service record in the army, an inebriated state at the time of making the alleged seditious statements etc. were factors that could save him from the venom of his wife, but if he proved to be a former communist or a communist sympathizer, a wife's testimony alone would suffice to ruin him.

If the spouse could gather witnesses, she was more likely to be successful, even though her motive was private. Airing disapproval of the regime in front of neighbours or guests could endanger the effectiveness of the dictatorship, if it went unheeded. Even for those wives who falsely accused their husbands, the Gestapo carried out the function of a 'disciplining' and 'moralizing' agency, which *to some extent* served the purpose of the denouncer; for example, speeding up the case with the health authorities, as in the case of Herr Hof, or extracting the promise from an irresponsible and aggressive husband like Herr Kremer that he would act as a responsible head of the household. The role that the Gestapo took upon itself of 'disciplining and punishing' the 'erring husbands' shows a very interesting aspect of the social history of the Third Reich. The popular perception of the Gestapo is that of a dreaded political police. But the ease with which the wives went to the Gestapo to report their domestic troubles points to a different side of this political police. It shows that the dynamism unleashed by the provision of denunciation willy-nilly dragged the Gestapo into matters of a social and civic nature on which it spent a considerable amount of time, energy and meagre resources. Since the Gestapo had orders to investigate thoroughly cases where the spouses were denouncing each other, it could not ignore them. Even where the Gestapo discovered that the denunciation was 'personally motivated' or 'an act of revenge', it assumed the role of a 'patron' in putting homes 'in order', and these women were able to use this organ of the state quite effectively for their own purposes. The use and abuse of power was, therefore, not just happening from top to bottom, it was happening from the bottom upwards too.<sup>27</sup>

The evidence shows that denunciation in the family was carried out predominantly by women. Denunciation had the unintended consequence of giving women an extra-legal, extra-judicial and pseudo-political stick with which to beat their husbands. The Gestapo offered different solutions to the problems of conjugal life, an alternative to divorce, for example. There were situations in which a husband became overbearing but not to the extent that the wife

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27 This is the central argument of Robert Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society*, op. cit. and K.M. Mallmann and Gerhard Paul, *Herrschaft und Alltag: Ein Industrieviertel im Dritten Reich* (Bonn 1991).

wanted a divorce. In addition, initiating a divorce suit in the civil court could have been unaffordable for these housewives, most of whom were not gainfully employed. There were cases in which they were constantly negotiating power rather than wanting an abrupt end to the relationship. Some merely wanted to 'teach their husbands a lesson'. The cases of divorced wives are even more interesting. The reason for divorce was often cited as the violent disposition of the husband; and the husband, in such cases, was declared the guilty party. Still, the wish to avenge physical and verbal abuse remained and these 'wronged' wives resorted to the Gestapo for this purpose.

Denunciation of a husband to the Gestapo remained predominantly an urban and working-class phenomenon.<sup>28</sup> A common perception of these working-class wives, which may have derived from their culture and background, was that they would be able to overpower and get rid of their husbands merely by stamping them as communists. They believed that their husbands, if not eliminated for ever, would at least 'be educated' in a work camp or a concentration camp. Given the kind of ruthless persecution to which communists were subjected, it is all the more remarkable that the women thought this way.<sup>29</sup> But they were probably not so educated about the fact that the Gestapo had its own mechanism for sifting denunciations. In most cases, the husbands were baselessly accused of being communists, but wives found this an effective means of retaliating against constant mistreatment.

These generalizations, however, need to be revised in the case of Poles, who were degraded to the lowliest of ranks by the regime. Race was a bigger determinant than gender, and in those cases 'Aryan' women were clearly not the victims. They took advantage of the racial policies of the regime to get rid of their husbands, for whom such denunciations were fatal, irrespective of the intentions behind them. A purely personal reason for denunciation was no grounds for acquittal and at times the nature of the crime did not matter much either.

Present evidence undermines the claims of the historian Diewald-Kerkmann that the family, as a primary unit, had a great tendency, even in National Socialism, to act like a shield which could not be penetrated by the all-pervasive national socialist ideology.<sup>30</sup> Kerkmann's position can be explained

28 I selected around 50 samples from the countryside (these are not included in the list of samples on p. 1) to see if wives of farmers and peasants also denounced their husbands but could not find any.

29 Out of a total of about 6759 Gestapo files of victims in Düsseldorf, KPD (Communist Party) is numerically the most preponderant category of crime, representing 1367 cases, followed by the Jews at 1289. The other 50 categories are well below 1000 files, of which 42 categories do not even cross the 100 mark. This pattern repeats itself in the case files of Krefeld, Cologne and surrounding areas. See Eric A. Johnson, *Nazi Terror. The Gestapo, Jews, and Ordinary Germans* (New York 1999), chap. v, 161–94 here 174–5; Bernhard Schmidt and Fritz Burger, *Tatort Moers: Widerstand und Nationalsozialismus im Südlichen Altkreis Moers* (Moers 1995), 14. On the persecution of Communist Party members in Ruhr, see Detlev Peukert, *Die KPD im Widerstand: Verfolgung und Untergrundarbeit an Rhein und Ruhr 1933–1945* (Wuppertal 1980).

30 Giesela Diewald-Kerkmann, *Politische Denunziation im NS-Regime* (Bonn 1996), 126.

by the kind of source she used: the cases of denunciation reported to the Nazi Party. In fact, as I have shown, the Nazi Party was often not the body which housewives approached to denounce. They preferred to go directly to the Gestapo or the police. Of the twelve cases cited here — including the footnote references — only three were handled by the Nazi Party, eight were reported either directly to the Gestapo or the criminal/ordinary police, while in one case the information cannot be traced. We also hope to have dealt with Eric Johnson's claim that denunciation by wives against their husbands was a 'myth', and to have shown that they denounced not because of 'the all-pervasive Nazi *terror*' but because they had their own agendas.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, a comment is perhaps required about what was happening to the private/public dichotomy of civil society in Nazi Germany. What perceptions of threat made people cross the boundary between the two? We shall approach this from three perspectives: those of the Gestapo, the wife and the husband.

For the Gestapo it was dangerous if a 'serious enemy' like a communist, a defeatist, or a Pole went unreported even by a spouse. And if it led to the break-up of the family, it was still desired. Here, the state did not hesitate to intrude into the private realm of the family with total disregard for the right to privacy of the marriage partners or for the breach of trust by the spouse. These documents showed the contradiction between the political expediency of the police and the theoretical ideal that it professed and propagated about the 'Aryan' family and marriage.<sup>32</sup>

The privacy of the household, however, became dangerous, isolating and alienating for wives who were being beaten, ill-treated, deserted or betrayed by their partners and they themselves chose to invite the intrusion into the private realm by a political agency. Here, 'gender troubles' forced them to break into the 'big world' of politics. Although these troubles originated in the context of the family, and the family was, so to say, the arena where the struggle was going on, the whole discourse spilled out in semi-public spaces and entered the realm of state and politics as soon as the state agencies, witnesses and others came on the scene. The agency that a woman acquired and practised was a socio-political one in that political and social concerns were drawn into the private. It was not just a matter of settling scores with the patriarch of the house. These women were openly expressing a wish for emancipation, claiming their rights within the household for individual freedom, for freedom over their bodies. They were making an issue out of forced sexual intercourse within marriage, domestic violence, verbal, sexual and physical abuse, etc. The 'big world' of politics was being enacted in a miniature form in the 'small world' of the family. Just as the 'private' was dragged into the 'public' by the police, the

31 Johnson, *op. cit.*, 26 (emphasis added).

32 On Nazi ideals of the 'Aryan' family and marriage see Annette Kuhn and Valentina Rothe, *Frauen im deutschen Faschismus*, vol. 2 (Düsseldorf 1987), 114–27; Lisa Pine, *Nazi Family Policy, 1933–1945* (Oxford 1997), 15ff.; Ute Benz (ed.), *op. cit.*

political was drawn into the private by housewives who denounced their men for social, sexual and moral offences as well as for 'political' ones.

In the husbands' behaviour, we see the 'big world' of politics quietly moving into the 'small world' of family when the public realm became dangerous. Those husbands who had a public life in their work place were living a dual existence of obedience in public and defiance in private. The dictatorship silenced them in matters that belonged to the public/political realm, which forced them to withdraw into the inner realm of privacy within the family. Typical comments of the Gestapo like 'politically the accused has not come to our notice before' bear testimony to this silence in public. Those husbands came home frustrated and drunk after work and criticized their leaders and whatever else they thought was wrong with the system. Privacy within the household was conceived by them as a space for unmasking, for releasing tensions and anxieties that had accumulated due to curbs on their freedom of expression outside. To their dismay even this private realm was polluted with the hatred and aggression of the outside world and no longer remained safe for the act of unmasking.<sup>33</sup> Sometimes, the head of the household became 'the other', and found himself in the minority. The historian Karin Windaus Walser rightly suspected that it was the power not only of the father but also of the mother that showed its ugly side in National Socialism, arguing that they created a destructive cosmos together.<sup>34</sup> Our stories, in addition, show that the power of the mother could also be directed against the father.

The private/public dichotomy was not just being dismantled from above but also from below. The public/political did not remain isolated from the private/domestic/personal. Therefore, the 'big world' of politics did not stand over and above the 'small world' of the family. The two became inextricably intertwined.

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33 Denunciatory practices at home led to such bizarre reactions from the spouses, here male spouses, that a husband employed in the local court in Essen denounced himself to the Gestapo for fear of being denounced by someone else, which could have damaged his reputation at his work place. His wife, after an argument with him, openly called out that he was listening to the foreign radio, making him vulnerable to denunciation from anybody in the neighbourhood. This forced him to denounce himself. The wife apparently wanted to get rid of him. See Gellately, 'Denunciations in Twentieth-Century Germany', op. cit., 947.

34 Karin Windaus Walser, 'Gnade der weiblichen Geburt?', *Feministische Studien* (November 1988), 113–14.