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Abstract

This paper examines the Weimar Republic's reaction to the population crisis after the First World War. The Reich government created welfare policies to boost the birth rate and decrease the infant mortality rate. These policies were often unrealistic or too exclusive for working-class women. As a result, they did not greatly impact the lives of working women or their procreation. The Weimar policies, therefore, failed in its efforts to increase the birth rate among working-class women.

Keywords

Weimar Republic, Motherhood, Working-class, women

**Working Women and Motherhood:
Failures of the Weimar Republic's Family Policies
By Katie Quirin**

During the interwar period, the high number of casualties from the First World War combined with decreased birth rates created population crises for European nations such as France and Germany. The Weimar Republic, started in 1919, was particularly concerned with the depleted population. Fritz Burgdorfer of the Bavarian and Reich Statistical Office estimated that Germany lost 12-13 million people because of the war, or one fifth of the nation's total population.¹ The loss of these Germans was not bolstered by the birth rate, which declined post-war and continued to decline throughout the interwar period. It fell from 27.5 in 1913, to 25.9 in 1920, and to 14.7 in 1933, then the lowest figure throughout Europe.² To combat these issues and to boost the birth rate, the Weimar Republic turned to family policy. In order to separate themselves from the pronatalism of the fallen monarchy, the Weimar government attempted to encourage motherhood through a host of social welfare programs. The programs included tax benefits, maternity leave benefits, and increased healthcare to combat the high infant-mortality rate. These programs did not, however, realistically encourage the majority of working women to have more children; the incentives given often excluded certain groups of women and working women could not feasibly partake in all aspects of the programs because of working-class lifestyles and financial concerns. These issues thus represent a failure in the Weimar Republic's policies towards motherhood and the population crisis.

While scholars have written a large number of works pertaining to women and motherhood during the Weimar Republic, a smaller number have focused on the cultural and

¹ Burgdorfer broke it down into "6.5 million lost as a result of territorial changes in the Versailles Treaty; 2 million killed in action; 0.75 million civilian victims of the Allied 'hunger blockade'; 100 000 deaths in the 1918 influenza epidemic; 3-3.5 million never born, because of the war. Total 12.35-12.85 million." Detlef J. K. Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik. Krisenjahre der Klassischen Moderne* (Frankfurt a.M., 1987), quoted in Cornelia Osborne, *The Politics of Body in Weimar Germany: Women's Reproductive Rights and Duties* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 31.

² Detlef J. K. Peukert, "Der Schund- und Schumtzkampf als 'Sozialpolitik der Seele,'" in H. Harrmann *et al.* (eds), *"Das war ein Vorspiel nur...". Bucherverbrennung Deutschland 1933* (Berlin, 1983), 51-64, quoted in Osborne, *The Politics of Body*, 32.; Osborne cites a chart of the "[a]verage number of children born per marriage, date of marriage and profession" that depicts the decrease in births in every profession mentioned, as well as an overall decrease for the population. Reinhard Spree, "Der Geburtenrückgang in Deutschland vor 1939," *Demographische Informationen* (1984): 62, quoted in Osborne, *Politics of the Body*, 33.

governmental views on motherhood in relation to the population crisis.³ In “Mother’s Day in the Weimar Republic,” Karin Hausen looked at the cultural emphasis on motherhood through a specific lens: Mother’s Day. Hausen examined how “the Mother’s Day ideology glorified the idea of motherhood in order to promote population increases,” focusing primarily on the interest groups who were concerned with the morality of the society.⁴ Hausen argued that the programming of Mother’s Day offered a “magic formula” that connected the self-sacrifice and devotion of mother “in an attempt to implant the seeds of self-sacrifice in future generations of young women.”⁵ Through this self-sacrificing ideal, Hausen contended that the efforts surrounding Mother’s Day tried to change German perceptions about motherhood. While Hausen’s culture-based argument provided a detailed look at how one part of German society reacted to the population crisis, it was too narrow to offer a complete understanding of the public’s response to the low population levels.

In *Modernizing Tradition: Gender and Consumerism in Interwar France and Germany*, Adam C. Stanley also portrayed the interwar emphasis on motherhood primarily through a specific cultural lens, advertisement, but focused on its relation to the Weimar Republic’s policies regarding the population crisis. Largely citing the work of Cornelia Usborne, discussed below, Stanley described the efforts of the Weimar Republic to increase women’s healthcare in order to encourage higher birthrates.⁶ By claiming the Germans unilaterally accepted the governmental propaganda, Stanley asserted that the advertisements were evidence of a cultural reaction to the population crisis that resulted from these policies.⁷ However, since advertisement is a narrow field, Stanley’s work did not encapsulate the specific responses of German women to

³ Other works have examined the medical fears surrounding pregnancy, the involvement of a women’s movement and motherhood, the societal views on housewives and working wives, and the role of women in politics. See Patricia R. Stokes, “Pathology, Danger, and Power: Women’s and Physicians’ Views of Pregnancy and Childbirth in Weimar Germany,” *The Society for the Social History of Medicine* 13 no. 3 (December 2000): 359-380, accessed September 17, 2013, <http://shm.oxfordjournals.org/>; Patrizia Albanese, *Mothers of the Nation: Women, Families and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987).; for additional sources, see Bibliography.

⁴ Karin Hausen, “Mother’s Day in the Weimar Republic,” in *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, eds. Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman, and Marion Kaplan (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), 131.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁶ Adam C. Stanley, “Women’s ‘Delight Duty’: The Discourse of Mother,” in *Modernizing Tradition: Gender and Consumerism in Interwar France and Germany* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 2008), 57-8.

⁷ Stanley argued that the German people accepted the policies towards procreation “virtually unanimously.” *Ibid.*, 57.

these policies, and therefore overlooked an important factor in the examination of the cultural response to the Weimar Republic's efforts to combat the population crisis.

In *The Politics of the Body in Weimar Germany: Women's Reproductive Rights and Duties*, Cornelia Osborne's argument provided more balance between societal and governmental involvement than Hausen or Stanley; Osborne presented a detailed look at the government's efforts to increase the population with evidence on how these policies affected women. In her analysis of the reaction to the population crisis, Osborne demonstrated how the Weimar Republic focused on women's healthcare. The government meant for these advancements in women's healthcare to convince more women to become mothers and to decrease the high infant mortality rate.⁸ Osborne also examined how women received these policies and their effectiveness.⁹ By examining not only what the government did but also how the policies were received by women, Osborne offered the most fully-developed assessment of the Weimar Republic's response to the population crisis. Her argument lacks only a closer view of women's responses to Weimar Republic's efforts to combat the population crisis, and a comprehensive discussion of the failure of the policies.

Unlike the work of Mouton, Osborne, Stanley, and Hausen, Tim Mason in "Women in Germany, 1925-1940: Family, Welfare and Work. Part I" examined the population crisis during the Weimar Republic through statistical analysis of family size and motives behind the decreasing size of families, but he only provides a discussion of the government involvement in increasing the population in post-1933 Germany. Mason analyzed census records and other statistical reports to demonstrate the decreased family size, his primary focus in his description of the population crisis.¹⁰ He interpreted these statistics by discussing what could have culturally affected a woman's ability to have larger families. While Mason did describe the far right's morally driven response to the population crisis, it seemed to function primarily as a lead in to his section on "Women and Family 1933-1940," not as a full examination of the response to the population crisis in Weimar Germany.¹¹ He examined the governmental response to mothers in this section, but by ignoring the policies of the Weimar Republic, Mason portrayed the interwar

⁸ Osborne, *The Politics of Body*, 34. For a description of these policies, see page 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 210. For analysis of effectiveness, see examples on pages 43, 50 of Osborne's text.

¹⁰ Mason compared the number of married women and the average family size pre- and post-WWI; Tim Mason, "Women in Germany, 1925-1940: Family, Welfare and Work. Part I," *History Workshop*, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 82, accessed September 5, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288034>.

¹¹ Mason's section entitled "Women and Family 1933-1940" begins on page 86 of "Women in Germany."

years as a prelude into the Nazi regime. Mason's work, along with Usborne's, Stanley's, and Hausen's, can be added to by examining the ways in which the Weimar policies failed to produce a higher birth rate for working-class women as a result of the limited nature of some of the policies and issues with the implementation of them.¹²

A brief explanation of the policies enacted is needed for an understanding of how successful the policies of the Reich were at increasing motherhood. The Weimar Republic's policies towards women began in the Constitution itself, which included conflicting clauses. As Usborne described, "Article 121, for example, accorded children born out of wedlock equal rights and effectively undermined article 119, which protected the sanctity of marriage. Article 163, which promised every German the right to work, ran counter to article 119, with its pledge to promote population growth and protection of motherhood."¹³ These inconsistencies reflected the Weimar government's struggle to "create state policy that would at once respect traditional values and recognize and adapt to social change."¹⁴ Beyond the Constitution, the Weimar Republic made several policies throughout the interwar period to help increase the birth rate. The Law for Maternity Benefits and Maternity Welfare, passed on September 16, 1919, granted maternity benefits for women with a yearly income of less than 2,500 marks.¹⁵ The law continued the maternity benefits from WWI, that had consisted of "a lump sum of 50 marks to cover the cost of delivery... a maternity benefit equivalent to sick pay... for ten weeks, a breast-feeding allowance of at least 0.75 marks per day for twelve weeks; an extra 25 marks should complications during pregnancy require help from a physician or midwife," as well as extending the period of payment and providing support for all dependents in a man's family.¹⁶ These "breakthrough" policies of the early Weimar period served as the beginning of the governmental emphasis on motherhood within the new republic, but the issues would not be addressed with policy again until the mid-1920s.¹⁷

¹² Michelle Mouton's book largely follows these ideas, presenting the policies of the Weimar and Nazi governments in conjuncture with personal accounts to measure their effectiveness; See Michelle Mouton, *From Nurturing the Nation to Purifying the Volk: Weimar and Nazi Family Policy, 1918-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹³ Usborne, *Politics of the Body*, 35.

¹⁴ Mouton, *From Nurturing*, 272-3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁶ Usborne, *Politics of the Body*, 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The Weimar Republic passed additional laws concerning motherhood that began with family allowances to state employees and civil servants. In May 1924, salaried Reich workers received statutory child benefits, which were extended to manual workers in June 1926, and to civil servants in 1927. Public-sector employees were “granted a spouse’s allowance, a reduction in school fees (if their families were large) and preferential treatment in employment decisions” between 1923 and 1927. They also received “tax benefits after the first child with an increase for each subsequent child.”¹⁸ In addition to these benefits for civil servants, there was an increase in maternity benefits in 1926 that covered the cost of midwifery, and provided medical help and the medications and equipment needed for a home birth. The Weimar Republic followed this law by being the first European country to ratify the Washington Convention on July 16, 1927, which focused on working women by extending maternity leave from eight to twelve weeks, granting two half-hour periods for breast feeding during the work day, and protecting pregnant women or recent mothers from dismissal.¹⁹ Finally, the government extended incentives beyond these policies by awarding mothers for having large numbers of children.²⁰

Despite the apparent breakthroughs in women’s welfare created by these laws, the Reich policies towards mothers often were ineffective because they did not include all women in the Republic. The mid- to late-1920s laws towards civil servants exemplified this failure. The laws for state employees and civil servants were clearly exclusive: the benefits did not extend to women or families in other areas of the economy, such as agriculture or industrial labor. Furthermore, this exclusivity reflected social elitism, as Osborne described, “[T]his highly selective system of benefit, aimed at what was largely regarded as an elite group, mirrored the increasing tendency towards eugenics.”²¹ These laws were focused on an occupational group that “was well known for having few children,” with hope “that extra money would encourage larger families.”²² Beyond the exclusivity of the policies, the monetary stipends of the laws did not always encourage an occupational group known for small families to have larger families.²³ The benefits were often more symbolic than financially valuable. For higher-ranking employees with

¹⁸ Osborne, *Politics of the Body*, 43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 47-9.

²⁰ In Prussia, for example, these benefits were awarded to women with twelve or more children, and they received an honorary cup or hundred marks; Mouton, *From Nurturing*, 113.

²¹ Osborne, *Politics of the Body*, 43.

²² Osborne, *Politics of the Body*, 41.

²³ *Ibid.*

“a monthly salary of about 900 RM,” a 20 RM child benefit a month was “obviously no incentive to have more children,” though those with lower salaries may have benefited from the extra money.²⁴ Furthermore, the benefit for the first child was halved in 1931 by a Bruning emergency decree, destabilizing the entire system.²⁵ While these programs were intended to be beneficial, they did not serve to make a significant impact on increasing motherhood. The programs not only excluded a majority of working women by serving only civil and state employees, but they also proved to not be enough of a benefit for the government workers to have significantly larger families. The child benefits for government workers, therefore, would not have produced dramatic increases in the birth rate.

In addition to the problems with the functionality of the benefits for government workers, the Weimar policies towards working-class women proved to be ineffective for multiple reasons. First, the laws themselves were not always realistic for working women.²⁶ Usborne described the problem with the policies being followed:

Twelve weeks’ maternity leave also often turned out to be wishful thinking. Because maternity benefits lagged behind wages, most women could not afford to take time off with less pay. The result was that many women violated the regulations...nearly 40 per cent of the women had worked until the last week of pregnancy and that one third had returned to work within four weeks of birth, ignoring the statutory period of six weeks’ maternity leave. Only very few women who returned to work continued to nurse their babies.²⁷

For working women, the maternity benefits provided by the Weimar government often were not financially realistic. Additionally, women “forfeited their maternity rights out of ignorance or fear of dismissal or discrimination.”²⁸ Finally, the benefits also were ineffectual because some employers required medical examinations of their workers, and would not employ pregnant women; this restriction served to further limit the ability of working women to utilize the family benefits.²⁹ These multiple issues demonstrated how the Reich family policies during the interwar period were not significantly effective in combating the population crisis. Even though the

²⁴ Ibid., 43.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ According to the census results of 1925, “nearly 3 million women worked in industry, an increase of almost 50 per cent” from the 1907 census. This increase, particularly of married women and women in the reproductive age group, worried lawmakers, who thought working may have contributed to the population crisis. Ibid., 45.

²⁷ Usborne, *Politics of the Body*, 49.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 50.

policies ideally helped working-class women, taking advantage of them was often unrealistic based on the women's need for frequent paychecks and secure employment.

In addition to the impracticality of the policies towards working women, the maternity benefits of the Reich were restricted to only certain groups of women. The 1927 law did not provide coverage for “domestic servants, home workers or women working in agriculture.”³⁰ This omission, which Osborne describes as “less an oversight than a practical compromise,” neglected a large percentage of working women, especially in agriculture.³¹ Women agricultural workers made up “[n]early half of all the working women in the Weimar Republic,” and “nearly 70 per cent of all married women workers.”³² Since agricultural work comprised the largest percentage of women workers, the exclusion of them from the 1927 law is striking. No matter the gains these policies made for some, particularly industrial, working women and their children, the majority of working women did not receive these benefits. As such, the Reich policies could not have possibly been very effective in changing women's procreation, as a vast number were not given the benefits.³³ Additionally, the 1927 law did not even reach all industrial workers, since the benefits only applied to full-time workers.³⁴ Even when the Weimar Republic attempted to extend the maternity benefits beyond the Washington Convention for women workers, it fell short of providing for a large portion of German working women.

Beyond the problems the Reich policies had with providing benefits for the majority of German women, the policies also proved to be insufficient at vastly changing maternal health. After WWI, the government established ante-natal clinics in an attempt to combat the “persistently high levels of maternal morbidity and mortality or, more importantly, the perceived connection between maternal health and the survival chances of babies.”³⁵ While there were well-functioning clinics in Berlin, such clinics did not arise in the rest of Germany, largely because ante- and post-natal care did not receive as much governmental support as infant care,

³⁰ Ibid., 49.

³¹ Osborne explained that the compromise was formed because “middle-class Germany housewives who sought to protect their own economic interests against domestic servants' unions, had foiled several attempts to extend labour protection to domestic workers. Home workers [including agricultural workers] were notoriously difficult to protect by law because of the unofficial nature of their work.” Ibid.

³² Renate Bridenthal, and Claudia Koonz, “Beyond *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*; Weimar Women in Politics and Work,” in *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, eds. Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman, and Marion Kaplan (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), 46.; Osborne, *Politics of the Body*, 50.

³³ Osborne, to some extent, excused these failures by explained that “most other European countries lagged behind Germany's maternal welfare programme.” Osborne, *Politics of the Body*, 50.

³⁴ Bridenthal, Grossman, and Kaplan, “Introduction,” in *When Biology Became Destiny*, 12.

³⁵ Osborne, *Politics of the Body*, 51.

leaving maternal medical care reasonably neglected. Functionally, this meant that “the majority of working-class expectant mothers either received no medical attention or, if they were insured, faced long journeys to an overcrowded surgery.”³⁶ Furthermore, ante-natal clinics did not always provide working-class women with practical advice. Clinics encouraged pregnant women “to adopt a healthy life-style for the sake of the future generation, to practice meticulous physical and moral hygiene, to follow a strict diet, to consult an ante-natal clinic as soon as they suspected pregnancy, to arrange for delivery and to prepare a layette.”³⁷ For working-class women, the personal attention to health suggested by the clinics was not feasible for their lifestyles, in which women potentially worked twelve hour days only to return home to care for their households and families.³⁸ As a result, the medical aid provided to women did not dramatically change the lives of working women; even when women were treated by ante-natal clinics, they were largely unable to make the recommended healthy changes to their lives for the duration of their pregnancies. The benefits introduced in the Weimar Republic, therefore, did not make a significant difference in the health of pregnant, working women, which would not lead to more live births, as the policies intended.

The trouble working women had with receiving medical treatment and maternity benefits, and thus the effectiveness of the Weimar policies, can be examined through studying the accounts of women of that time. One such example is the personal account of a textile worker’s workday and weekend, part of a 1928 study by the Textile Workers’ Union on female employee’s attitudes.³⁹ An unnamed woman described a workday that, with travel, lasted twelve hours in addition to taking care of her family and household. During breaks from standing for her nine and a half hour shift, she mended laundry. When she returned home at 9 pm, she had to tend to the household wash and prepare a meal. She stated outright the difficulty of working and maintaining a home: “My view is that if a housewife and mother could be at home, then the household and children would be better served....*As far as I’m concerned, the work at home would be enough.*”⁴⁰ In another essay, a woman detailed the difficulty of caring for her young

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Osborne, *Politics of the Body*, 59.

³⁸ An example of this is shown in “My Workday, My Weekend,” *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, eds. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 208-10.

³⁹ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 46.

⁴⁰ *Mein Arbeitstag, Mein Wochenende. 150 Berichte von Textilarbeiterinnen*, ed. Deutscher Textilarbeiterverband (Berlin: Textilpraxis Verlag, 1930), 187-189, quoted in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 208. It has been

children before and after the work day, and how exhausted the workday made her, particularly because she was pregnant. Furthermore, she described the emotional toil of working and caring for a household: “Often I sit there and howl like a child, for no reason; I’m so tired, my nerves just go.”⁴¹ Lastly, she wrote of how she could not afford extra help, stating, “A cleaning lady is too expensive for me, for the 25 marks average earnings a week 1.50 marks already goes for transportation, 6 marks for childcare, and what it otherwise costs for you to be out of the house all day.”⁴² Both these sources depicted the day-to-day difficulties of working mothers, which largely correlates to the failures of the Weimar Republic’s maternal policies. Industrial female workers, physically and emotionally exhausted from their workday and household duties, could not easily change their lifestyles for healthier pregnancies, and with a budget that just covered the cost of sustenance, missing extended periods of time for work was not possible. Working-class women, therefore, were largely untouched by the Weimar family policies.

Another example of how working women were unable to fulfill the goals of the Weimar maternal policies comes from an essay about an abortion case.⁴³ In it, Else Kienle described how, “Eighty percent of all patients who go to a doctor to have their pregnancy terminated are women who have already had several children.”⁴⁴ She explained the type of family situation that would cause a mother to have an abortion: “Where four people sleep in the same bed and experience it as a rare event when together they can afford thirty cents for a bit of ham—in such conditions a fifth being simply has no right to exist. Hunger and love have been and remain the primal drives of human beings, and love is quite likely the only diversion a family of workers can afford.”⁴⁵ Her example can be considered from the view of a working family, as she alluded to the family

translated as “My Workday, My Weekend” in the *Sourcebook*. Hereafter, it will be cited as “My Workday, My Weekend.”

⁴¹ “My Workday, My Weekend,” 209.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Abortion was a controversial topic during the Weimar Republic, and much has been written about it. See Atina Grossman, “Abortion and the Economic Crisis: The 1931 Campaign Against Paragraph 218,” in *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, eds. Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman, and Marion Kaplan (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), 66-86.; Cornelia Osborne, *Culture of Abortion in Weimar Germany* (New York: Berghahn, 2007); Atina Grossmann, *Reforming Sex: The German Movement for Birth Control and Abortion Reform, 1920-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).; Ulinka Rublack, “The Public Body: Policing Abortion in Early Modern Germany,” in *Gender Relations in German History: Power, Agency and Experience from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, eds. Lynn Abrams and Elizabeth Harvey (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 57-80.

⁴⁴ Else Kienle, “Der Fall Kienle,” *Die Weltbühne*, no 15 (April 14, 1931), 535-9, quoted in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 213. It is translated as “The Kienle Case” in the *Sourcebook*. Hereafter, it will be cited as “The Kienle Case.”

⁴⁵ Kienle, “The Kienle Case,” 213.

of four having working parents. As she described, poor families who barely supported themselves could not afford to bring another child into the world. The maternity benefits of the Reich did not adequately address this obstacle in boosting procreation. Though the Weimar government granted tax benefits for having children to state employed individuals, the programs for working-class mothers were based largely on welfare and financial relief specifically for pregnancy, not necessarily motherhood. While the tax benefits were needed by some of the poorer state workers, the lack of them for working-class people demonstrated another exclusion within the Weimar maternal policy. Families such as the one Kienle described, therefore, would not have been sufficiently supported through the Reich's programs, and as a result, would not have had the addition of children the government hoped for.

In reaction to the population crisis after the First World War, the Weimar Republic passed family policies to increase the birth rate largely through welfare programs. These policies included some tax benefits and additional maternity welfare benefits to combat the high infant mortality rate. While these programs were groundbreaking in advancing women's welfare, they did not significantly affect working-class women. Some policies did not include all types of working women, while others were not feasible for the daily lives of working-class women. Overall, the holes in these policies created welfare programs that did little for working-class women of the Weimar Republic. As a result, these women were not able to significantly increase the population, or even decrease infant mortality, thus demonstrating a failure in the Weimar policies.

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