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Women in the Third Reich – the image of the ideological model and social practice in the memoirs and diaries of female residents of Nazi Germany (1933-1945)

Question of the role and position of women in the Third Reich has been discussed since the end of World War II. Initially, mainly due to the perception of women as apolitical, it was believed that they were not involved in Nazi structures. The guards who have been acting for the criminal regime which was proven during the post-war trials, were regarded as isolated cases. As second-wave feminism took shape, views on women's involvement in Nazi politics began to change. From the 1980s, researchers on the subject began to look more critically at the actions of women between 1933 and 1945. With the development of research, two opposing views on the matter began to emerge. One of them were researchers who supported the model of women-victims, on the other hand – supporters of the theory of women's conscious and active participation in the criminal policy of the Third Reich. In the 1990s the views have shifted to form a compromise regarding the women involvement in the ruling regime. It was stated that the women's community cannot be viewed as a general one, but can be distinguished, for example, by their origin, political views, education or marital status. This dissertation is part of the above-mentioned compromise. Its aim is to show that the community of women in the Third Reich was diverse. Efforts were also made to prove that the model of femininity propagated by the Nazis differed from the actual image of life of German women.

This thesis is composed of an introduction, eight chapters, conclusion and bibliography. The first chapter is introductory and describes the situation of German women between 1848 and 1933. It is divided into three subsections. The first subchapter concerns the period from the Springtime of Nations to the beginning of World War I and shows women's path to emancipation, taking into account the struggle for voting rights, access to education and possibility of taking up paid work. The second subchapter describes the life of women during the World War I. The third subchapter concerns the changes taking place in the Weimar Republic.

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The second chapter discusses the change in the situation of women in Germany between 1933 and 1945. This chapter is divided into two subchapters. The first focuses on the transformations in the country and shows how they affected the situation of women. It takes into account how the Nazi policies influenced the possibilities and conditions of work, family life and access to education. The second subchapter describes the everyday life of women during World War II, paying attention to such aspects as: professional work, the hardships of single motherhood or involvement in warfare.

Chapters from third to eighth have similar structure. The first subchapters focuses on discussing the fates of specific groups until 1939, the seconds in period between 1939 and 1945. Third chapter describes the situation of wives of prominent Nazis. Fourth concerns with the lives and careers of actresses and singers. Fifth chapter presents silhouettes of women who were connected with the ruling regime on a professional ground. Sixth chapter focuses on women connected with resistance movement. Chapter seven examines fates of Jewish women. The last chapter describes silhouettes of women which were not showing extreme attitudes toward Nazi policy, but were trying to function within the existing order.

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