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Dictatorship in Practice: Everyday life in Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany,
Franco's Spain and the Stalinist Soviet Union

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'How did one's gender affect the lived experience of a dictatorship?'

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In Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany (1933-1945) and Francisco Franco's Spain (1939-1975), a foundational belief divided men and women into 'separate spheres';¹ this patriarchal ideology, which was popularised during the nineteenth century, determined the roles that the genders played within society.² The principals of this ideology insisted that women were to be confined to the 'private' sphere, where they would be 'the model of pious domesticity',³ whilst their male counterparts navigated the 'public' sphere of politics. Through this foundational belief and the ultimate goal to curate an idyllic image of the 'family unit',⁴ the expectations of what each genders' experience should be, in Nazi Germany and Francoist Spain, was established. Historians, Gisela Bock and Mary Nash, argue that the women under the Nazi and Francoist dictatorships were victims of this patriarchal ideology as the regimes encouraged that the 'private' sphere was the space for the motherhood and pushed for pronatalism, which connoted a mandatory subserviency to men.

However, other historians, such as Vandana Joshi and Inbal Ofer, revise these arguments and propose that the lived experience of one's gender was not as separated as it seemed to be in Nazi Germany and the Spanish State, as they analyse genders merging their respective spheres as women demonstrated their agency and men retreated into the counterparts' sphere. Therefore, the view of women as victims of the regimes is contested as aspects of everyday life demonstrate autonomy against gendered expectations. Although, it can be argued that women's experiences of agency were at the will of their patriarchal regimes; whilst this does still suggest

¹ Ross, Cathy. 'Separate Spheres or Shared Dominions?' in *Transformation*, Vol.23, No. 4 (2006): p.228

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Nash, Mary. 'Pronatalism and motherhood in Franco's Spain' in *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare State 1880-1950s*, edited by Gisela Bock and Pat Thane (London; New York: Routledge, 1991): p.170

that lived experiences between the genders interacted, it does undermine the notion of female agency.

Firstly, looking at the implementation of the concept of separate spheres in Nazi Germany, the regime's leader, Adolf Hitler, made the distinction between the purpose of men and women clear during his speech to the National Socialist Women's League on the 8th of September 1934. Hitler stated that a woman's world is 'her husband, her family, her children, and her home',⁵ whilst the man's world is 'the State, his struggle, his readiness to devote his powers to the service of the community'.⁶ Here, the Führer has confirmed how the lived experience should be under his dictatorship. To further elaborate, the 'natural'⁷ destiny of a woman in Nazi Germany was to complete her biological purpose of motherhood as Nazi Germany urged for pronatalism in order have a supply of soldiers for their regime, as well as bolster a pure "Aryan" population'.⁸ For this reason, Gisela Bock views women's lived experiences in Nazi Germany as one of victimhood as they were solely used as vessels for the Nazi ideology and the continuation of its legacy.

Bock furthers this argument of women as victims in Nazi Germany by acknowledging the policies of antinatalism and its detriment to the lived experiences of women of different

⁵ 'Hitler's Speech to the National Socialist Women's League (September 8, 1934)' in *Nazism, 1919-1945, Vol. 2: State, Economy and Society 1933-1939*, edited by Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000): p.255

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bock, Gisela. 'Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization, and the State' in *Signs*, Vol.8, No.3 (1983): p.402

⁸ Rupp, Leila J. 'Mother of the 'Volk': The Image of Women in Nazi Ideology' in *Signs*, Vol.3, No.2 (1977): p.363

racism or religion, which have commonly been ignored in previous historiographies.⁹ With Nazi ideologies wanting a pure race, the regime issued antinatalist policies in the 1930s that were shaped by National Socialist racism.¹⁰ In 1933, the regime introduced a law that was essentially a ‘state-run birth control’¹¹ that declared that ‘biologically inferior hereditary material’¹² would face compulsory sterilisation. These forms of eugenics targeted ‘Jews, Gypsies, Blacks and other “alien” races’.¹³ By acknowledging the hardship of the ‘other’¹⁴ women in Nazi Germany, Bock illustrates that the lived experiences of female victimhood intersected with race and religion. From Bock’s argument, all women were victims of the National Socialist regime, whether it forced them into the traditional roles of motherhood or having their rights to bear children being stripped away from them.

The patriarchal ideology of separate spheres was also fervently pursued in Francoist Spain. However, in contrast to Nazi Germany, these spheres were additionally fuelled by traditional Catholicism as religion played a key part in all the genders’ lived experiences in the State of Spain. Francisco Franco, himself, was a devout man, and ‘always emphasised the centrality of religion in politics and the role of the Christian family as the social basis for the state.’¹⁵ With this traditional mentality and the agenda of the *grandeza* (‘the greatness of Spain

⁹ Bock, ‘Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization, and the State’, p.402

¹⁰ Bock, Gisela. ‘Antinatalism, Maternity and Paternity in National Socialist Racism’ in *Nazism and German Society, 1933-1945*, edited by David F. Crew (London; New York: Routledge, 1994): p.111

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.114

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.115

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Ginsborg, Paul. ‘Chapter 4: Family and family life in the Spanish Republic and the Civil War, 1931-1950’ in *Family Politics: Domestic Life, Devastation and Survival, 1900-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014): p.279

based on imperial expansion, population increase and its recuperation as a world power'),¹⁶ the regime promoted pronatalist attitudes amongst the Catholic women of Spain. Similar to Bock's interpretation, Mary Nash argues that women in Francoist Spain also experienced the dictatorship as victims, especially since women's rights regressed when the Second Spanish Republic fell to the Spanish Nationalists.

This reversion of social progress and advocacy for familialism was further emphasised by Franco's government as they introduced fiscal policies such a *dote* (a dowry), the *subsidio familiar* (1938) and the *cargas familiares* (1945), which encouraged young women to give up their jobs, marry men and start families. These fiscal policies supported for the Spanish government's legal statement of *Fuero del Trabajo* in 1938, which declared that the state 'will free married women from the workshop and the factory'¹⁷ and ensured that they would be reliant on their male counterparts. The enforced gender asymmetries on the Catholic Spaniards, in the vein of traditional values, affected the lived experience greatly as it augmented the 'social control and male hierarchy within the family and the regime itself'.¹⁸

The consequences of failing to abide to the traditional Catholic ideals of the family oversaw gender asymmetries as well. Aurora G. Morcillo presents the inequalities surrounding the punishment of adultery. Morcillo notes that 'punishment was harsher for the adulterous

¹⁶ Nash, 'Pronatalism and motherhood in Franco's Spain', p.160

¹⁷ Excerpt of '*Fuero del Trabajo*, March 9, 1938' in Nash, Mary. 'Pronatalism and motherhood in Franco's Spain' in *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare State 1880-1950s*, edited by Gisela Bock and Pat Thane (London; New York: Routledge, 1991): p.171

¹⁸ Nash, 'Pronatalism and motherhood in Franco's Spain', p.173

wife than the adulterous husband.’¹⁹ If a man was caught having an affair with a married woman and the husband injures him (without killing him), no further punishment was taken. However, if a woman was caught conducting adultery, she was deemed as a ‘fallen woman’²⁰ and socially ostracised by the community. Furthermore, if she had any children she lost custody of them as the custody would then be appointed to any known male relatives.²¹ Here, it is evident that men also benefit more, even outside of the desired image of family, demonstrating another asymmetry in lived experiences that is affected by gender. With Nash’s and Morcillo’s arguments both considered, it is clear that men have more to gain and less to lose in Francoist Spain as the ideologies favour the outcome of men and their needs – a man’s lived experience in Francoist Spain, according to Nash and Morcillo, is much easier than a woman’s.

Despite Nash and Morcillo arguing that victimhood was the experience of women in Francoist Spain, Inbal Ofer counteracts this argument by investigating the merge of spheres and the role of the *Sección Femenina de la Falange*, or simply known as the *Sección Femenina*, which was founded in June 1934. Through the *Sección Femenina*, Ofer presents the notion that women were not solely victims of the Francoist regime; instead, they were a group that had agency, and the importance and scale of the *Sección Femenina* was not recognised by previous historians because of its ‘apolitical nature’.²² Moreover, when historians discussed the topic of the gendered experience, specifically with women, in Francoist Spain, the focus was on either women in the context of men (as Nash has argued) or the ‘high-ranking left-wing political

¹⁹ Morcillo, Aurora G. ‘Chapter 4: Perfect Wives and Mothers’ in *The Seduction of Modern Spain: The Female Body and the Francoist Body Politic* (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 2010): p.143

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.144

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Ofer, Inbal. *Señoritas in Blue: The Making of a Female Political Elite in Franco’s Spain* (Brighton; Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2009): p.2

activists, women intellectuals and artists, and women prisoners or political exiles.’²³ Ofer’s perspective demonstrates female agency and authority in the lived experience under the Francoist regime and this characteristic was widely recognised as masculine. Furthermore, despite Nash highlighting that the *Sección Femenina*’s Francoist ultimately ‘did not achieve its [political] objective’,²⁴ the women’s organisation improved working conditions and under their authority, employment of female workers and girls in education increased as the *Sección Femenina* provided these through their organisation.²⁵ Here, lived experience of women is not of victimhood but of agency, which benefitted the everyday experiences of fellow women under the Francoist regime as they became ‘visible’²⁶ in the State’s official census.

Despite being in a hierarchical system that was in favour of the patriarchy, the women took exerted authority within their own spheres and constituted a practical example of the *Sección Femenina*’s outside accepted conventional gendered expectations as the work of the *Sección Femenina* reinforced the future of the State of Spain. However, Ofer acknowledged that the men of the Francoist regime were essentially unaffected by this merge of spheres since it was the *Sección Femenina* were stepping into their ‘public’ sphere and the men limited the women to ‘apolitical matters’²⁷ or ‘gender appropriate positions’²⁸ – the experience of a female agency in Spain was limited by the men who were at the helm during Franco’s dictatorship. Although, even with this clear imbalance of agency, Mary Vincent presents the interpretation

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Nash, ‘Pronatalism and motherhood in Franco’s Spain’, p.173

²⁵ Ofer, *Señoritas in Blue: The Making of a Female Political Elite in Franco’s Spain*, pp.30-35

²⁶ Ibid., p.88

²⁷ Ibid., p.3

²⁸ Ibid., p.11

that the Francoist regime ‘stressed the involvement of women... [and their] apolitical nature’²⁹ since *Sección Femenina* strong following of Francoism and Fascism demonstrated the dictatorship’s desired perception of ‘natural order’,³⁰ suggesting the aspects of the lived experience in Francoist Spain saw men relying on women to convey the ideologies of the regime.

In Nazi Germany, the merging of ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres, and demonstration of female agency can be interpreted through the denunciations. Vandana Joshi argues against Bock’s approach of women as mere victims of the Nazi regime. Joshi states that the ‘environment of hatred’³¹ in Nazi Germany influenced the ordinary women; they became complicit to the regime’s aims as the Gestapo’s intrusion into the ‘private’ sphere was made attainable because of ‘the active co-operation of spouses, particularly [from the] wives’³² in the form of denunciations. In some cases, the women of Nazi Germany used the policies of the Nazi regime to their advantage in order to improve their lived experiences under the dictatorship,³³ especially since the violence and tension of the ‘public’ sphere retreated into the ‘private’ sphere. Claudia Koonz describes this as SS men returning to ‘a doll’s house of *ersatz* goodness in which he could escape from his own evil actions’³⁴ as she views the State and

²⁹ Vincent, Mary. ‘Spain’ in *Women, Gender and Fascism in Europe, 1919-1945*, edited by Kevin Passmore (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003): p.213

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Joshi, Vandana. ‘The ‘Private’ became ‘Public’: Wives as Denouncers in the Third Reich’ in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 37, No.3 (2002): p. 42

³² Gellately, Robert, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy, 1933-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990): pp.147-149, paraphrased in Joshi’s ‘The ‘Private’ became ‘Public’: Wives as Denouncers in the Third Reich’, p.419

³³ Joshi, ‘The ‘Private’ became ‘Public’: Wives as Denouncers in the Third Reich’, p.434

³⁴ Koonz, Claudia. *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (London: Methuen, 1988): p.6

space the home as separate entities but does not acknowledge that the home was not a safe haven for either gender.

Joshi's provides examples to illustrate the socio-political dangerous that ordinary people under the regime. A report of a denunciation from Frau Kremer highlights the lived experience of the majority of married women in the Nazi regime.³⁵ Frau Kremer was a 'battered wife',³⁶ demonstrating the violence that men of the 'public' sphere brought into the supposedly detached 'private' sphere. However, in order to denounce a man in Nazi Germany, the denouncer had to gain support from a man since Frau Kremer's accusation was acknowledged because a male air raid shelter warden, Herr Kaufmann, vouched for her. Whilst some men were at risk of wrongful denunciations by scorned or unhappy wives,³⁷ women were at a greater risk since they were more likely to be unacknowledged because of their gender. This mirrors aspects in Francoist Spain, in which the men in the regime controlled and regulated women and their positions in society. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the 'public' and 'private' were 'inextricably intertwined',³⁸ regardless of the power asymmetries.

In some cases, power asymmetries arguably shifted in favour of women as Adelheid von Saldern states that women in the Nazi regime were 'able to cope with difficult situations,

³⁵ 'Case 3.' in Joshi's 'The 'Private' became 'Public': Wives as Denouncers in the Third Reich', p.425

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Joshi, 'The 'Private' became 'Public': Wives as Denouncers in the Third Reich', p.432

³⁸ Ibid., p.435

especially during the war'.³⁹ Here, female agency and strength was used not out of terror or personal agenda but to 'ensure the survival of their families.'⁴⁰ Perhaps the ultimate factor that affected one's life was the war as this brought about a mutual reliance between the genders to make certain that the lived experience was bearable. This was also seen in the State of Spain in regard to continuing the Francoist ideology, as the men in highest positions relied on the *Sección Femenina* to indoctrinate the women and the women relied on the men to elevate their socio-economic and political position.

In both dictatorships, Nazi Germany and Francoist Spain, gender affected one's lived experience. The extent of gender's effect on lived experience, and whether if it played a detrimental or beneficial factor in everyday life is complex. Nash's and Bock's arguments of female victimhood as a causation of the patriarchal ideology of 'separate spheres' were undermined by Joshi's and Ofer's counter-arguments of interconnected social structures, and inherently depicts Nash and Bock's views as general attitudes as they do not consider the apolitical experiences within the dictatorships. However, Bock does acknowledge how race and religion affected women's experiences under the regime, raising awareness on the intersection of gender with social class, race, and religion. Although, there is a commonality amongst these differing views and attitudes – the lived experiences of women were controlled by men since these dictatorships were products of the patriarchy, the actions of women were regulated by the gaze of man and the system was always in favour for the man.

³⁹ von Saldern, Adelheid. 'Victims or Perpetrators? Controversies about the Role of Woman in the Nazi State' in *Nazism and German Society, 1933-1945*, edited by David F. Crew (London; New York: Routledge, 1994): p.149

⁴⁰ Ibid.

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