

Honors Thesis Proposal

Working Title:

From World War II to Reunification: An Examination of 20th Century Germany's Reproductive Rights, Policies, and Practices

Project Purpose:

To examine the reproductive rights and policies afforded to, and the reproductive practices of, Germans during the Nazi Regime, American and Soviet occupations, and after reunification; to then compare these rights, policies, and practices, to those of modern day Germany.

Project Importance:

From the Nazi Regime to the reunification of East and West, 20th century Germany was a time of transition, division, occupation, and political extremism. The various regimes within this period are thoroughly studied, however, this thesis will specifically consider the laws governing reproduction during these periods and the reproductive practices of German citizens, how these elements evolved from one to the other, a fascinating and pertinent historical thread that is rarely the point of focus in historical analyses.

Project Overview:

Since the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 with the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision, there has been increased interest in reproductive rights and policy in the United States, current and historical. Such policies impact all citizens of this country in some way, but no group more fiercely and more directly than American women. As a member of this subgroup, I took special interest in the transition from reproductive policy under *Roe v. Wade* to those in the wake of *Roe*'s overturn. It was this recent transition in the United States that inspired this thesis; 20th century Germany faced a myriad of transitions in terms of political ideals and regimes, intra-national boundaries, the removal of those intra-national boundaries, economic health, occupation, and independence. Does it not fit that, through these transitive periods, reproductive policy also underwent change? How were these changing policies enforced? How did the people of Germany respond to them? How did these policies and practices morph into each other? These are the questions I would like to answer through this thesis.

Given the level of detail I hope to achieve, I begin my historical analysis with Nazi Germany rather than the turn of the century. It is at this era that the studies on reproductive policies in 20th century Germany seem to end. This is also the era where, as stated by Usborne (2011), the majority of reproductive freedoms slowly afforded to the German people up through the Weimar republic were reversed, specifically for Germans deemed genetically "valuable" to the propagation of the Aryan race. At the same time, there was little punishment for abortion among Jewish, Romani, and otherwise Nazi-labeled "defective" individuals; these groups instead faced forced sterilization and castration (Usborne 2011). Women, particularly those in concentration camps, were abused by Nazi doctors to experiment with new obstetric techniques (Kaupen-Haas 1988). It goes without saying that the Nazi period was a horrific one, and this sentiment rings true for the reproductive policies, practices, and abuses of the time.

Fast-forwarding from the end of World War II to the formation of East (the DDR) and West Germany, we see that two vastly different reproductive cultures develop. The DDR, offering benefits to families for having children while legalizing abortion (to a certain degree), saw an increase in population despite the liberalization of reproductive policy (Butner & Lutz 1990). In contrast, West Germany's policy reflected the popularized ideal of Mutterschutzgesetz, which emphasized the woman's role in the home and as a mother, purporting to be undoing the "forced emancipation" of women during the Second World War; with motherhood reinstated as woman's purpose, reproductive policy remained relatively conservative (Moeller 1989). When East and West reunified and the Berlin Wall fell, it was the more stringent policies of the West that were adopted by the now whole Germany.

The above paragraphs represent a few of the central topics and time periods examined through this thesis. I hope to explore as many topics as I possibly can, to give the most accurate and thorough examination of this important topic that I possibly can. To that point, I must address some of the limitations of this thesis; not only is this an undergraduate thesis, but I am also stepping a bit outside my comfort zone with a historical analysis. As a STEM major, this is not the kind of writing I most commonly deal with. Thus, this thesis will not cover all that it should or could. Nonetheless, I am remarkably passionate about this topic and will be as comprehensive, detailed, and diligent as my abilities and experience allow, with the help of my wonderful and qualified thesis committee to fill in the inevitable gaps. I hope that this thesis will bring some insight into how reproductive policy in 20th century Germany evolved and how it impacted (and perhaps still impacts) the German people.

Qualifications of Thesis Committee:

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Hans-Wilhelm Kelling of the German and Russian Department

I met Dr. Kelling as a resident of the Foreign Language Student Housing, a program he oversees. By happenstance, I ended up in his Intermediate German Language class that same year. Dr. Kelling is one of my favorite professors with whom to discuss history, culture, and politics, and when I presented him with this idea for an Honors thesis, he could not have been more supportive and enthused, citing at the outset studies and historic events relating to reproductive rights in Germany, and drawing on his own experiences living in Germany during World War II. As a prolific scholar of German cultural history and a native German himself, Dr. Kelling is uniquely qualified to be my Faculty Advisor for this thesis.

Faculty Reader: Dr. Michelle James of the German and Russian Department

After running my idea through Dr. Kelling, he advised me to contact Dr. James about being my Faculty Reader. Dr. James is an associate professor in the German and Russian department and the former Department Chair. In addition to her duties as a professor of German, Dr. James has researched and published works on the writings of German and German-speaking women. I believe that for this thesis, in addition to expertise in German history on the whole, it is imperative to seek expertise in the history of German women, the population most impacted by German reproductive policy. This is the expertise of Dr. James, and this is the expertise imperative to my thesis.

Honors Coordinator: Dr. Christian Clement

Timeline:

Milestone:	Estimated Completion Date:
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Preliminary research completed	November 15, 2023
Full outline completed (research continues)	December 15, 2023
Research organized into outline (research continues), rough draft completed	January 25, 2024
Finalize written draft with Faculty Advisor	February 5, 2024
Prepare to defend thesis	February 2024
Defend thesis	By March 8, 2024

IRB: None

Funding: \$1200 requested; if awarded this funding, I will be able to travel to Germany and access invaluable legal and historical archives at Humboldt University, Freie Universitaet Berlin, and the German Bundestag Library

Culminating Experience: to be determined

References:

- Buttner, Thomas, and Wolfgang Lutz. 1990. "Estimating Fertility Responses to Policy Measures in the German Democratic Republic." *Population and Development Review* 16 (3): 539. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1972835>.
- Heidrun Kaupen-Haas. 1988. "Experimental Obstetrics and National Socialism: The Conceptual Basis of Reproductive Technology Today." *PubMed* 1 (2): 127–32.
- Moeller, Robert G. 1989. "Protecting Mother's Work: From Production to Reproduction in Postwar West Germany." *Journal of Social History* 22 (3): 413–37. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3787743?casa_token=AzBYGr80K58AAAAA%3AQMR-upRJ7itBbwI3fFu9fnLBKaLGglVyaZKXd4jfgRk7aWUh_Y0l3C8G6EjFZ5PzNiqqEBtE1F7quU9fFq0lBi9oxr3wKKTP0KIYweu9Q7DBOaric4x0&seq=3.
- Usborne, Cornelia. 2011. "Social Body, Racial Body, Woman's Body. Discourses, Policies, Practices from Wilhelmine to Nazi Germany, 1912-1945." *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 36 (2 (136)): 140–61. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41151278?casa_token=kP-

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