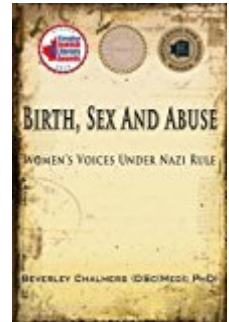


**Beverley Chalmers.** *Birth, Sex and Abuse: Women's Voices under Nazi Rule.*

Guildford: Grosvenor House Publishing, 2015. viii + 364 pp. \$25.50, paper, ISBN 978-1-78148-353-4.



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In her new book, *Birth, Sex and Abuse: Women's Voices under Nazi Rule*, Beverley Chalmers, a professor in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Ottawa, who has dedicated her life to studying women's experiences of pregnancy, birth, and the early months of parenthood in many contexts across the globe, examines violence toward women during the Nazi regime. At the outset she clearly states that this book is neither a "German history text" nor a "history of the Holocaust," nor is it a "theoretical speculation on the academic intricacies of interpretation that could be derived from any or all of the information contained in the book" (p. 2). Instead Chalmers aims to provide a "multi-disciplinary perspective incorporating social science, medicine and history" that uses the "voices of women as a lens through which to understand Nazi society" (pp. 4-5).

Chalmers begins with an introduction that summarizes the core tenets of Nazi ideology and its racial basis for persecuting Jews. She then divides the book into two sections. In section 1,

"Pregnancy and Childbearing," she surveys sterilization and euthanasia before turning her attention to motherhood for non-Jewish women. She then examines Jewish motherhood and birth in ghettos, in hiding, and in concentration camps. She concludes section 1 with a discussion of the medical profession and reproduction, in particular medical experimentation with sterilization in concentration camps. In section 2, "Sexuality and Sexualized Abuse," Chalmers opens with a discussion of Nazi attitudes toward sex and sexuality among non-Jewish Germans. She then presents her extensive findings on the sexual abuse, sexual cruelty, and rape of Jewish women in ghettos, forced labor camps, partisan groups, and concentration camps.

The strength of this book lies in the vast array of examples drawn from different contexts in which violence and cruelty targeted women and their reproduction. Chalmers has uncovered these examples in memoirs and diaries of women who lived through the Nazi era and in reports and memoirs of doctors, soldiers, and Nazi officials

who witnessed and perpetrated violence against women. In section 1, she documents in great detail the ubiquitous violence directed against women's reproduction and sexuality and the sadistic and misogynistic nature of those attacks. By drawing together examples of policy decisions that shaped motherhood, pregnancy, and birth in ghettos and concentration camps, she moves beyond the generally accepted fact that pregnant women were selected early for death. She shows how this reality played out for individual women, Jewish and German doctors, and Nazi and Jewish leaders. The story she tells reveals details of how decisions about abortion, forced abortion, and infanticide were made and carried out by individual women and doctors and highlights the moral dilemmas associated with them. Chalmers emphasizes that pregnancy should not be regarded as resistance during the Holocaust. As she states, pregnancy and childbirth "might have given hope (albeit false) to their ghetto or prisoner companions, [but] it was by no means a heroic or—probably in most cases—a deliberate act" (p. 94).

In section 2, Chalmers gives voice to the ways that Jewish women could (albeit to a limited extent) use their sexuality to help them survive. She rejects the idea that Jewish women could enter sexual relations consensually, since often "sexual exchange" represented the "only way to survive" (p. 181). She touches on the question of survivor guilt, which was especially intense for women whose survival was associated with the use of sexuality. She also argues that while most of the violence and inhumane behavior perpetrated against women can be attributed to Nazis, some of the blame falls also on the Kapo (Nazi-appointed Jewish prisoners in concentration camps) and ordinary Jewish men. Chalmers notes that it is crucial that these experiences be told, since "the fact that human beings were treated so badly as to force the integrity and humanity of some to be expunged and replaced with vicious, dishonest or disrespectful behavior towards each other, says more about the perpetrators of such conditions

than it does about the most basic human instincts for survival that emerged" (p. 209). The examples that Chalmers's book provides underscore the magnitude of this crime against women and expands our understanding of Jewish women's experiences during the Holocaust.

The value of the book is greatly reduced by the fact that its author relies solely on English texts and translations. This limits her ability to contextualize, and leads to inaccuracies. For example, she often confuses Nazi policy with its implementation, a serious pitfall given the not infrequent discrepancy between Nazi policy design and its implementation.[1] Chalmers provides a new perspective on the prevalence and nature of violence against women, especially Jewish women, during the Holocaust, but not a new understanding of Nazi society as she lists as one of her goals, nor an explanation of why the violence against women happened in the context of the Holocaust. At various moments in the book, Chalmers emphasizes Nazi indoctrination, sexual indulgence, humiliation, racism, misogyny, dehumanization, and disrespect as factors enabling the Nazis to commit crimes against women. While these may indeed all have contributed, many other studies have advanced our understanding further into what enabled the Holocaust and its crimes to occur.[2] Chalmers emphasizes that her study demonstrates "our need to look squarely in the face of such actions and to recognize that it is not the actions of the doctors that should be condemned but those of the Nazis who imposed such horrendous conditions on them that they were forced into despicable moral dilemmas and consequent murderous behaviors" (p. 256). We know, however, that doctors and Nazis are not two distinct groups and that doctors and Nazis and Nazi doctors acted for many different reasons and with many different motivations. As a result, as individuals they bear different levels of responsibility. Finally, Chalmers ends her book with a warning that "the dangers of ideological fanaticism are globally evident today, as they were in the Nazi

era, and are clearly to be feared” (p. 256). While the threat posed by ideological fanaticism is undeniable—both then and now—this statement implies an ahistorical similarity between the Nazi era and the present day that detracts from the strength and breadth of the cases she presents.

#### Notes

[1]. On these discrepancies, see, for example, Gisela Bock, *Zwangssterilisation im Nationalsozialismus: Studien zur Rassenpolitik und Frauenpolitik* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1986); Georg Lilenthal, *Lebensborn e.V.: Ein Instrument nationalsozialistischer Rassenpolitik* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1993); and Michelle Mouton, *From Nurturing the Nation to Purifying the Volk: Weimar and Nazi Family Policy 1918-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[2]. Most notably, see Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998); and Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (New York: Mariner Publishing, 2014).

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