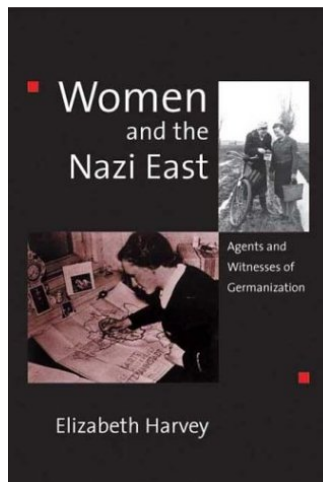

Women and the Nazi East: Agents and Witnesses of Germanization by Elizabeth Harvey, Yale University Press, 2003, 352 pages, 37 b/w illus. + 7 maps.



This pioneering book examines the role of women in Nazi Germany's "nationality struggle" during the 1930s and in measures to Germanize occupied Poland during World War II. Drawing on previously untapped materials from Polish and German archives, as well as memoirs and oral testimony from German women who were sent to wartime Poland, Elizabeth Harvey analyzes the function of female activism within Nazi imperialism, its significance, and the extent to which women embraced policies intended to segregate Germans from non-Germans and to persecute Poles and Jews. Harvey has reconstructed the role of individual women – some enthusiastic, others reluctant – in the creation of an ethnic barrier against the supposed threat from "alien" Slavs and Jews in the conquered Polish territories.

■ Casting fresh light on women's attitudes and involvement in Nazi policies, the book emphasizes the distinctive nature of female complicity in the system of racist domination. Harvey offers a new perspective on Nazi occupation policies, with vivid insights into regime practices at the grass roots and German civilian responses to the treatment of the Polish and Jewish population. In addition, she explores the complex ways in which Germans after 1945 remembered the Nazi East.

Under the Nazis, women's organizations were explicitly targeted as propaganda vehicles, in which girls and women were recruited to provide assistance to farming families in the eastern borderlands. The combined effect of such projects was to bring modern benefits (fertilizers, dental care, etc.) to rural areas along with a political mission to instill a combative "borderlands consciousness." Through such activism a pattern of womanly engagements in the "nationality struggle" was forced. This study is not only about what women did and what women witnessed in the East, and above all in occupied Poland after 1939, but how they interpreted it at the time and through retrospect. For some women working in the pre-war eastern borderlands and later in occupied Poland, the "German East" was from start to finish a site for female missionary work. The construction of that mission drew on the legacy of Imperial Germany's overseas colonialism, Germanization efforts in the Prussian East and "protection work" on behalf of German minorities abroad. These, together with the most recent experiences of defeat and class divisions within Weimar democracy, shaped the definition of a female role in defending "Germandom" against Slavic and Jewish "aliens." To be capable of mastering the territory, Germans on the ethnic frontier had to be loyal, disciplined, efficient and attuned to modern farming and housekeeping techniques. This logic dictated attempts to influence rural family and village life in the eastern borderlands of the Reich before 1939, attempts which were training grounds for the larger-scale efforts to Germanize conquered Poland after 1939. For women who embraced both the Nazi exaltation of the domestic sphere and the colonizing drive to the East, such activism was based on attractively simple propositions – righting German wrongs, promoting the welfare of mothers and children – that could be presented as "non political" service to the nation. Straightforward "womanly" tasks were imbued with grand historical significance and the German communities who were the objects of this attention could be presented as endangered, needy and grateful.

The book offers a valuable and seriously under-researched perspective on the history of women and Nazism. Elizabeth Harvey is a senior lecturer in modern history at the University of Liverpool, the author of *Youth and the Welfare State in Weimar Germany* (1993), and co-editor, with Lynn Abrams, of *Gender Relations in German History* (1996).

Justyna Biegańska
