

## Das SS-Helferinnenkorps: Ausbildung, Einsatz und Entnazifizierung der weiblichen Angehörigen der Waffen-SS 1942-1949

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The SS-Helferinnenkorps, the women who volunteered to support the SS, and who formed a female Nazi elite, have to date been the subject of minimal research. Until now, very little was known about these women, where they came from, why they volunteered, how they were trained, where they worked, and what became of them after the war. Until now, because Jutta Mühlenberg seeks to redress this balance and answer those questions in her 576-page tome on the subject. This hefty volume extensively covers everything anyone would ever want to know about the SS-Helferinnenkorps – and more. Mühlenberg takes the reader on a journey from recruitment to training to employment to de-Nazification, and uses an array of detailed examples to bring the facts to life and to give an identity to these women who have scarcely appeared on the radar of Holocaust literature. Mühlenberg's biographical and statistical study reconstructs the SS-Helferinnenkorps, using numerous sources from a variety of archives. She builds upon the (limited) existing research to reveal why so many women wanted to become SS-Helferinnen.

The initial inspiration for Mühlenberg's research was a photograph album given to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2007.<sup>(1)</sup> The album had belonged to Karl Höcker, the adjutant to the commandant of Auschwitz concentration camp. Some of the photographs in the album showed members of the SS-Helferinnenkorps during their free time, in the vicinity of the concentration and death camp. These photographs, showing the women, laughing, and in their uniform, demonstrate firstly that women were more involved in the National Socialist systematic extermination policies than has often been assumed, and secondly, displays the disconcerting juxtaposition between those extermination policies in action, and the

carefree leisure time of those involved.

Despite Mühlenberg's extensive research, it is still not known exactly how many women served the Nazis during the war, although she gives approximate figures; the Wehrmacht (German Armed Forces, made up of the Army, Air Force and Navy) was supported by one female helper to around every 20 soldiers. The majority of these worked in the communications service.

After a thorough review of the other literature that touches upon this topic, Mühlenberg notes that none of the research looks into the motivations of these women, what they knew of the crimes and acts of extermination committed by the Nazis, or whether the women supported these acts, although, as she acknowledges, Franka Maubach's recent book does touch on some of these themes.<sup>(2)</sup> Mühlenberg tackles these and many more questions, looking at why the SS formed an SS-Helferinnenkorps, the tasks and goals the women were given, where they worked, how they were connected to the SS system, and what happened to them after the war. A mammoth task, but one which is necessary, given how little is currently known about these women and the role they played. Mühlenberg concludes her review of the historiography noting that it is surprising that a monograph on the SS-Helferinnenkorps has not yet been completed, given that there are extensive archives readily available. Neatly and succinctly, she demonstrates the vital contribution her book will make to the field.

Mühlenberg goes on to present her primary sources, which come from 15 archives, and the published sources which she uses. The documents of the former Berlin Documentation Center (now housed in the Bundesarchiv in Berlin), including Nazi party membership cards and personnel files, are key to her research, as are the application forms of those who applied to become SS-Helferinnen, which Mühlenberg assesses in detail. These forms form the basis of her statistical analysis of the SS-Helferinnen in a later chapter, and contribute to her knowledge of their motivations for volunteering.

It is not actually known who first had the idea of a school to train the women who would become SS-Helferinnen, but Himmler always wanted to have schools to instruct women, and had previously mooted the idea of Frauenhochschulen für Weisheit und Kultur [Women's high school for wisdom and culture]. The plans for the founding of the SS-Helferinnen school began in early 1942, on the personal initiative of the Chief of Telecommunications, Ernst Sachs. The ever-increasing territorial expansion of the Third Reich resulted in a need for personnel in the communication service, and so the Weibliches Nachrichtenkorps des SS [female communication corps of the SS] was established. These women would replace men, who would then be free to fight at the front. It was hoped these women would become a new female trained elite. The same strict racial criteria placed on those who wished to be the wife of an SS-man was applied to those who wanted to become SS-Helferinnen; for that reason, the wives, sisters and daughters of SS-men were encouraged to apply.

The Weibliches Nachrichtenkorps was established in July 1918, and the women were trained to operate radios, telegraphs and telephones so that they could replace men in the communication corps. It was inspired by, according to Ursula von Gersdorff, an English project, which used female motorcyclists.<sup>(3)</sup> In 1943, the Weibliches Nachrichtenkorps, which had been established under Himmler, changed its name to the SS-Helferinnenkorps. According to Mühlenberg, a Finnish female voluntary organisation was the model for the SS-Helferinnenkorps. 'Lotta Svärd' had been established in 1921 to relieve men who could then go to the front and fight. The women helped protect their homeland and strengthened the will of the people and were willing and able to replace men in any position. This inspired the (third) Commandant of the SS-Helferinnen school, Karl Mutschler, who expanded the remit of the SS-Helferinnen to extend beyond communications tasks. It is possible that both Gersdorff and Mühlenberg are correct, but perhaps greater clarity is needed.

Applicants to the SS-Helferinnen school had to be aged between 17–30 (although this was later extended to 35) and at least 1.65 m tall (later this was reduced to 1.58 m). They had to be recommended by either an SS-man, a Bund Deutsche Mädels leader (female equivalent of the Hitler Youth), or by a leader in the NS-Frauenschaft, the National Socialist Women's Organisation. The applicants' reasons for applying varied from professional to familial to personal to political. Mühlenberg gives examples to support each of the

different motivations. A rather interesting example is that of Anneliese D., who volunteered as a birthday present to her father. As an SS man himself, it was his wish that his two daughters became involved in the SS as well.

The selection procedure involved the completion of a detailed application form which required 15 different documents, an extensive written examination, a racial examination and a medical examination. The written exam took place at the local SS Office, and tested spelling, dictation, general knowledge and ideological knowledge. If the applicants passed these initial tests, they would receive a call-up. Sometimes it would take months between applying and being called up, either due to bureaucracy, or occasionally as a consequence of personal situations, for instance with bosses refusing to release their employees. The quickest call-up time was half a day after submitting an application; the longest was 749 days!

Mühlenberg analyses the applications in detail – based on the available evidence – to determine where the applicants came from and what their backgrounds were. The average age of applicants was 20 years old. The youngest applicant was 16 years old, the oldest 42 – and her application was received favourably, probably because she was Princess Ingeborg Alix, and was recommended for the position by her brother-in-law Prince Josias of Waldeck and Pyrmont, who was held in high esteem by the SS. Princess Alix went on to become a SS-Helferinnen leader. Of the applicants for whom Mühlenberg had data, 55 per cent had never lived away from home before. Only 14 per cent had a high school education, 25 per cent had a middle school education and 61 per cent had completed eight years of elementary school. However, this was higher than the national average for women at the time: in 1936, while 91 per cent of girls had completed elementary school, only 3 per cent completed middle school and only 6 per cent had completed high school. 42 per cent of fathers of applicants were members of the Nazi party, 7 per cent were in the SS, and 5 per cent in the SA. Mühlenberg concludes her statistical analysis by stating that the applicants were a heterogeneous group who had a higher affinity for National Socialism than their peers, and that they saw the possibility of social ascent through becoming a SS-Helferin.

The school itself consisted of a combination of existing and new buildings. The new buildings were built by concentration camp prisoners from nearby Natzweiler-Struthof, which was officially opened in May 1941. Once the initial building work was finished, the prisoners continued to maintain the premises. The SS-Helferinnen knew about the concentration camp and the prisoners, as they saw them daily. Some even saw them being beaten. Five SS-Helferinnen worked in the concentration camp as radio operators once they had completed their training, and in total 190 SS-Helferinnen had tasks which, at one time or another, took them to a concentration, extermination or satellite camp

The basic training course which all girls undertook lasted eight weeks. Each morning the girls would rise at 6.30am (although on Sundays they were allowed a lie-in until 8am) and they would begin their day with sport, dormitory cleaning and raising the flag. Only then, at 7.30am, would they receive their breakfast and would classes begin. On one of the last days of their training the women would take an oath committing themselves to the service, and then they would begin specialised training, which lasted between six and 24 weeks. Parallel to the specialised classes, which could be radio operations or telephone operations (for example), collective classes in singing, sport, mother schooling (which involved cooking, sewing, gardening and pet care), first aid, literature and ideology took place.

Mühlenberg astutely uses the SS-Helferinnen as a window to look at how women in Germany were required to act. The SS-Helferinnen were expected to behave impeccably and were, for example, forbidden from smoking. This was driven by Himmler's belief that all women who smoked were ideologically unreliable. If the girls did not maintain the good reputation expected of them, it was grounds for dismissal. From a sample of 2,765 women who received a call-up, 22 per cent were dismissed; 65 per cent of these were dismissed during their basic training, 9 per cent during specialised training, and 26 per cent from the positions of service. There were many specific reasons for their dismissal which Mühlenberg details; some were dismissed because of ideological differences, others due to personal reasons (sometimes girls requested their own dismissal), women left when they discovered that they were pregnant and some were dismissed for health reasons. As Mühlenberg gives reason after reason for their dismissal, and each reason is illustrated

with an example or two, there is a danger that this becomes rather list-like. To combat this, Mühlenberg's examples are frequently interesting and prevent this section from becoming a dull read. For example, six girls were thrown out basic training because of the theft of items including soap, cigarettes, gloves and a handkerchief, from their comrades. Other girls were dismissed when it was discovered that they were the source of a gonorrhoea infection.

From February 1943 the first SS-Helferinnen were sent out from the school, to positions all over the Third Reich and occupied Europe, to begin their service. In addition to replacing men, the long-term aim for the SS-Helferinnen was for them to replace all female civilian employees in the service of the Reichsführer; because the SS-Helferinnen had been trained in ideology, they were deemed more suitable and reliable. Mühlenberg presents a list of the various departments the women went to: almost every main office of the Reichsführer SS. Some SS-Helferinnen were sent to the administrative offices of concentration camps. The focus of the working areas of the SS-Helferinnen was the communication corps; three-quarters of all assignments were carried out as radio, telephone, or telex operators. As the Allies closed in, the SS-Helferinnen found themselves in precarious positions. When the school was evacuated, many SS-Helferinnen had to leave their belongings behind; those women who were in the local hospital at the time were themselves left behind. Other SS-Helferinnen found themselves stuck in what became Allied territory, and these women were interned.

Mühlenberg is very careful not to generalise and tar all the SS-Helferinnen with the same brush. Although all these women were a part of the bureaucratic staff, and were 'Mittäterinnen, Zuschauerinnen und zum Teil – auch Zeuginnen von Gewalttätigkeiten' [accomplices, spectators and sometimes even witnesses of violence] (p. 416), she notes that each woman still had individual responsibility over what she did, saw and knew, and it would be very difficult to identify the individual responsibilities of each SS-Helferin. Mühlenberg focuses on de-Nazification in the American sector, although the British zone is also discussed. A detailed report was drawn up by the Americans about the school, indicating how the women of the school should be dealt with; they were to be automatically detained. Although many were arrested and held in prison camps, it is not possible to give exact figures. Mühlenberg states that, for example, 700 women (out of a total of 9000 people) were interned in one particular British Civil Internment camp in December 1945, it is unknown how many of these were SS-Helferinnen. In later years, the SS-Helferinnen had to go through the de-Nazification process. Within each tribunal it was disputed whether these women were members of the criminal SS organization. As a consequence, there were many different and conflicting decisions in individual proceedings.

Despite her acknowledgement of the varying degrees of individual responsibility, Mühlenberg concludes that the guilt of the former SS-Helferinnen lies in their voluntary participation in the bureaucratic apparatus of the SS. She then gives short biographies of the leaders of the SS-Helferinnen, the commandants of the school, and those SS-Helferinnen in Auschwitz. There follows a selection of primary documentation, including the *Dienstordnung für SS-Helferinnen* [service regulations for SS-female helpers] and the *Vorläufige Einsatzordnung für SS-Helferinnen* [Initial Operational Orders for SS-Helpers]. Many other documents follow, allowing an insight into the sources Mühlenberg had at her disposal.

This book is the definitive guide to SS-Helferinnen. Mühlenberg has provided an admirable study which will serve as a foundation for further research into, and comparisons with, other groups of women who supported the Nazis. While Mühlenberg's extensive use of sources, both primary and secondary, detailed examples and statistical analysis make this a hefty book, it also makes it a thoroughly worthwhile read.

## Notes

1. The photograph album can be viewed online here: < <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/ssalbum/> [2]> [accessed 5 December 2011]. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Franka Maubach, *Die Stellung Haltung: Kriegserfahrungen und Lebensgeschichten von Wehrmachthelferinnen* (Göttingen, 2009). [Back to \(2\)](#)

3. Ursula von Gersdorff, *Frauen im Kriegsdienst* (Stuttgart, 1969) p. 31.[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

The book is also available as eBook for 20,- EUR, ISBN 978-3-86854-500-5 (<http://www.his-online.de/verlag/programm/detailseite/publikationen/das-s...> [3])

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7839>

[2] <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/ssalbum/>

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