



# WER IST WALTER?

International Perspectives on  
Resistance in Europe during  
World War II

Edited by

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# Filling a Gap: The “Women in the Resistance Against National Socialism” Exhibition of the German Resistance Memorial

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## Introduction

*“Even though I did not hold any official positions within the party, I was still a very active member, participating in all meetings and actively engaging in home and street propaganda. This led to disagreements between my husband and me, who, while accepting my membership in the KPD [Communist Party of Germany], nevertheless viewed my activity with reluctance.”<sup>1</sup>*

38-year-old Judith Auer explained her political career during an interrogation by the Gestapo in July 1944 with apparent confidence. Born Judith Vallentin in Zurich in 1905, she joined the Young Communist League of Germany (*Kommunistischer Jugendverband Deutschlands* – KJVD) in Thuringia as a young adult and participated in gatherings and protests. It is there that she met Erich Auer in 1924, a functionary of the KJVD and the Communist Revolutionary Union Opposition (*Revolutionäre Gewerkschafts-Opposition* – RGO).<sup>2</sup> The couple married in 1926 and two years later, moved to Moscow to work for the Communist International. Shortly after their return to Germany, their daughter Ruth was born in Berlin on 27 November 1929. Following the Nazi seizure of power, the Auers were initially active together for the now illegal Communist Party in Berlin and Thuringia. As a result, Erich Auer was arrested in March 1934 and sentenced to

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1 Quotation from an interrogation of Judith Auer by the Gestapo on 22 July 1944, 3, Federal Archives/*Bundesarchiv*: BArch, R 3018-1558 T.1.

2 Cf. “Auer, Erich”, Bundesstiftung Datenbanken, <https://www.bundesstiftung-aufarbeitung.de/de/recherche/kataloge-datenbanken/biographische-datenbanken/erich-auer>. All internet sources were last accessed on 20 October 2023.

one and a half years in prison for “preparing high treason.” In 1937, he was imprisoned again for three months.

Judith Auer continued her involvement in the resistance against the new regime after her husband’s arrest. Starting in 1937, she was employed as a purchasing agent at the Oberspree Cable Works in Berlin and made repeated use of business trips in the following years to carry out courier activities. For example, in the spring of 1944, she collected a bicycle tyre bearing an antifascist slogan from Magnus Poser<sup>3</sup> in Jena. The idea was to unroll the slogan on the street and make it visible using a special colour printing technique.<sup>4</sup> From October/November 1942 to January 1943, Judith Auer hid the fugitive communist Franz Jakob<sup>5</sup> in her home in Berlin-Bohnsdorf. She also repeatedly offered her home for illegal meetings and networking sessions for the Berlin resistance groups associated with Franz Jakob and Anton Saefkow,<sup>6</sup> the husband of her long-time friend Aenne Saefkow.<sup>7</sup> After she was denounced, Judith Auer was finally arrested at her workplace on 7 July 1944. During her interrogation by the Gestapo, she made the statements regarding the failure of her marriage cited above. According to Auer, the couple had divorced “by mutual consent” in 1939.<sup>8</sup> Their daughter Ruth subsequently lived with her mother. Judith Auer’s account suggests that her political involvement was a significant factor in the breakdown of her marriage; although he was an active communist himself, her husband Erich disapproved of her overly conspicuous activities. This interpretation of the cause of marital discord between the Auers is reiterated in the indictment brought in August of the same year by the People’s Court (*Volksgerichtshof*) against Judith Auer on charges of “preparing high treason.”<sup>9</sup> Two months later, Auer was sentenced to death. She was executed on 27 October 1944,

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3 Cf. “Magnus Poser”, Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, [https://www.gdw-berlin.de/vertiefung/biografien/personenverzeichnis/biografie/view-bio/magnus-poser/?no\\_cache=1](https://www.gdw-berlin.de/vertiefung/biografien/personenverzeichnis/biografie/view-bio/magnus-poser/?no_cache=1).

4 The indictment of the *Volksgerichtshof* (VGH) against Judith Auer and others, 7 August 1944, 14, BArch, R 3018-1558 T. 1.

5 Cf. “Franz Jakob”, Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, [https://www.gdw-berlin.de/vertiefung/biografien/personenverzeichnis/biografie/view-bio/franz-jacob/?no\\_cache=1](https://www.gdw-berlin.de/vertiefung/biografien/personenverzeichnis/biografie/view-bio/franz-jacob/?no_cache=1).

6 Cf. “Anton Saefkow”, Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, [https://www.gdw-berlin.de/vertiefung/biografien/personenverzeichnis/biografie/view-bio/anton-saefkow/?no\\_cache=1](https://www.gdw-berlin.de/vertiefung/biografien/personenverzeichnis/biografie/view-bio/anton-saefkow/?no_cache=1).

7 Cf. “Aenne Saefkow”, Internationales Ravensbrück Committee, <https://www.irk-cir.org/de/members/151>.

8 Quotation from an interrogation of Judith Auer by the Gestapo on 22 July 1944, 3, BArch R 3018-1558 T.1.

9 Indictment of the VGH against Judith Auer and others, 7 August 1944, 5, BArch R 3018-1558 T. 1.



Fig. 1: Judith Auer with her daughter Ruth, around 1938.  
(Source: Bundesarchiv Bild Y 10-198-523-66)

at the execution site in Berlin-Plötzensee.<sup>10</sup> After the war, Judith Auer was honoured in various ways in the German Democratic Republic (GDR); a street, a kindergarten and a retirement home in East Berlin were named after her.

<sup>10</sup> Judgement of the VGH against Judith Auer and others, 6 September 1944, BArch R 3018/1558 T. 1.

Her story is one of the case studies featured in the “Women in the Resistance against National Socialism” exhibition. This exhibition, currently being developed by a team at the German Resistance Memorial in Berlin, will open in July 2024.<sup>11</sup> Judith Auer has been presented as an example here because both of the above-mentioned sources – the interrogation and the indictment against Auer – reference gender-specific themes that have been fundamental to the concept of the exhibition. Implicitly, these sources indicate how Nazi judges and Gestapo officers viewed women active in the resistance such as Judith Auer. This raises the question why marital conflicts found their way into the interrogation records and the indictment of the “People’s Court” in the first place. The judicial record does not provide an explicit justification, but it is likely that Judith Auer’s persecutors wanted to express their disapproval of her prominent role in the communist movement. According to this interpretation, even her husband disapproved of her behaviour. As other studies on proceedings against women before the “People’s Court” also demonstrate, the judges were particularly disconcerted when a woman/wife played a central role in a resistance group.<sup>12</sup>

Auer’s statements also shed light on the dynamics of couples engaged in the resistance. Even in the left-wing labour movement, it was not always taken for granted that women could assume leadership positions, as Klaus-Michael Mallmann has pointed out.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, some women already held important political roles during the Weimar Republic and occasionally attempted to maintain these after the Nazi seizure of power.

## Research and work process

It may sometimes appear as if the history of National Socialism, which by now can fill entire bookshelves, has been thoroughly explored. However,

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- 11 The project team, in addition to the author of this article, includes: Lydia Dollmann, Carolin Raabe, Silke Struck, and Elisa Zenck. I finished this article in February 2024. At this moment we had finished the texts for the biographies, the acts of resistance and chosen the illustrations.
  - 12 Cf. Isabel Richter’s work on treason trials against women: Isabel Richter, *Hochverratsprozesse als Herrschaftspraxis im Nationalsozialismus: Männer und Frauen vor dem Volksgerichtshof 1934-1939* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot Verlag, 2001); Karen Holtmann, *Die Saefkow-Jacob-Bästlein-Gruppe vor dem Volksgerichtshof. Die Hochverratsverfahren gegen die Frauen und Männer der Berliner Widerstandsorganisation 1944-1945* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010).
  - 13 Klaus-Michael Mallmann, “Zwischen Denunziation und Roter Hilfe. Geschlechterbeziehungen und kommunistischer Widerstand 1933-1945”, in *Frauen gegen die Diktatur – Widerstand und Verfolgung im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland*, ed. Christl Wickert (Berlin: Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, 1995), 82-97.

there are still remarkable gaps. One of these is the role of women in the resistance, which has not yet been systematically examined. Furthermore, the vast majority of women who resisted National Socialism have not been recognized for their diverse and distinct actions. Resistance was long considered a male theme, even though individual stories, such as that of Judith Auer or the Munich student Sophie Scholl,<sup>14</sup> were present in both German states.

With the emergence of the New Women's Movement in the 1970s and 1980s, resistance by women during the National Socialist era received greater attention. However, it was often equated with a general struggle against patriarchy. This led to simultaneous heroization and victimisation of women, which at times not only reinforced gender stereotypes, but also obscured the view of male and female perpetrators and grey areas. In contrast, it must be emphasised that women who chose to engage in acts of resistance were an absolute minority, as Gisela Bock highlighted already in the late 1990s: "By 1937, the overwhelming majority of non-Jewish Germans were more or less staunch supporters of the regime, not least because of its domestic and foreign policy successes."<sup>15</sup> This applied to both men and women, although during the course of World War II, critical attitudes increased, particularly among women. This conclusion is suggested, at least, by the numerous proceedings conducted against women during the war for making critical, oppositional remarks.

For years, several historians including Johannes Tuchel, the director of the German Resistance Memorial Center, drew attention to the need for research on women in the resistance, until in June 2019, the German Bundestag finally passed a resolution to provide financial support for research on this aspect of National Socialist history.<sup>16</sup> The research project conceived within

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14 Sophie Scholl (1921-1943), a Munich student, took on a leadership role in the Nazi *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (BDM) when she was a young girl. She increasingly distanced herself from the new regime and participated in the production and distribution of a critical leaflet by the White Rose (*Weißer Rose*) resistance group in 1943. Scholl was arrested while distributing leaflets in Munich University and a few days later, on 22 February 1943, she was sentenced to death by the VGH and executed on the same day.

15 Gisela Bock, "Ganz normale Frauen. Täter, Opfer, Mitläufer und Zuschauer im Nationalsozialismus", in *Zwischen Karriere und Verfolgung. Handlungsräume von Frauen im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland*, eds. Kirsten Heinsohn, Barbara Vogel and Ulrike Weckel (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 1997), 245-277, here: 248.

16 "Bundestag würdigt Frauen im Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus", Deutscher Bundestag, 28 June 2019, <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2019/kw26-de-frauen-widerstand-646432>.

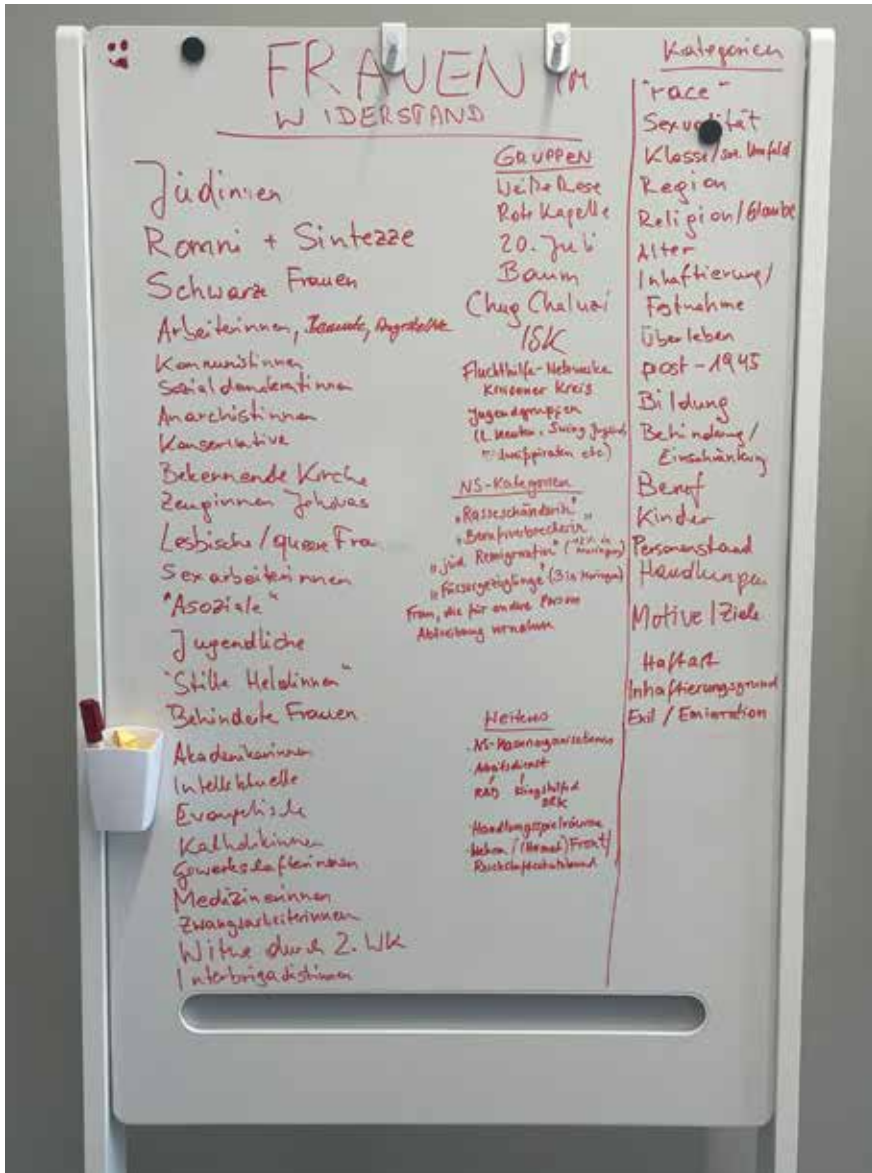


Fig. 2: Brainstorming of the project team “Women in Resistance against National Socialism”, Berlin 2020. (Photo: Dagmar Lieske)

this framework, which has led to the exhibition described here, explicitly does not view women as a collective. Instead, we want to enable visitors to gain insight into individual biographies and the scope of action available to women. At what point in her life did a woman decide to engage in acts of resistance, under what conditions did she act, and what risks did she incur?

These questions have guided our project, which is based at the German Resistance Memorial Center. Despite significant constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>17</sup> we have, since summer 2020, researched over 5.000 women by name, who can be shown to have engaged in acts of resistance against the National Socialist regime. These women are documented in an internal database, accompanied by brief biographies and keywords, which allow them to be sorted by political orientation or other topics such as “queer references.” The sample can be expanded after the opening of the exhibition, as there are plans for a website with further biographies and a book series to accompany the project.<sup>18</sup> How can one approach the resistance of women? Where can one find information about lesser-known examples? The German Resistance Memorial Center works with an integrative concept of resistance, whereby resistance encompasses all actions that contributed to harming the National Socialist regime.<sup>19</sup> This includes, for example, the writing and dissemination of illegal leaflets and participation in prohibited parties or groups, as well as individual assistance to Jewish and other persecuted individuals or repeated public criticism of the war and the Nazi leadership.

This integrative concept of resistance is the result of decades-long discussions in Germany. For a long time, actions against the regime that did not explicitly occur within the framework of illegal political groups were not well acknowledged – neither within historical research nor in cultural memory. In our research on women in the resistance, our project team, in close consultation with the leadership of the German Resistance Memorial Center, initially conducted investigations along the various hierarchical levels of the Nazi courts. Our analysis began with an evaluation of treason trials held before the *Volksgerichtshof* against women (and men),<sup>20</sup> followed

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17 During the peak phase of the pandemic from spring to autumn 2021, archives for example remained closed for months, so that sources could not be accessed on-site. The project team also had to rely on digital meetings for a long time, which sometimes complicated the work and team-building process. Further networking, such as conferences, was also not possible.

18 Volume 1 of the “Frauen im Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus” (Women in the Resistance against National Socialism) project series was published in 2022: Johannes Tuchel, ... *wenn man bedenkt, wie jung wir sind, so kann man nicht an den Tod glauben: Liane Berkowitz, Friedrich Rehmer und die Widerstandsaktionen der Berliner Roten Kapelle* (Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 2022).

19 Peter Steinbach, *Widerstand im Widerstreit. Der Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus in der Erinnerung der Deutschen* 2nd ed. (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000).

20 Fortunately, the digitised records of proceedings before the VGH could be accessed during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic: <https://db.saur.de/DGO/login.jsf?jsessionid=a78e7ef2704d471dde8e70205cd7>. In total, the proceedings against 580 accused women were reviewed and later supplemented with additional individual files from the Federal Archives Berlin (BArch).



by a review of selected treason proceedings of the Higher Regional Courts.<sup>21</sup> Finally, holdings of the District Courts and Special Courts were selectively examined.<sup>22</sup> The latter primarily cover the realm of individual and everyday acts of resistance, such as cases related to aiding persecuted Jews, as well as cases involving critical remarks or listening to so-called foreign “enemy radio stations” (*Feindsender*). In total, over a thousand case-specific court records against women were reviewed in this manner. These records form a crucial foundation for our research.<sup>23</sup>

To systematise the information obtained, our project team developed a template in the form of a sample excerpt. Alongside personal details and fields where the woman’s political biography and specific acts of resistance can be entered, there is also space to note gender-specific aspects that stand out in the court records. As Thomas Roth aptly put it, jurisprudence was “a central arena for the reproduction of images of femininity and masculinity”.<sup>24</sup> It always reflects a contemporary discourse – how are the accused perceived, what role does their gender play, and how is the act of resistance judged by the judiciary? Using examples from the sources, the following section sheds light on specific selected themes that stand out in proceedings against women: marriage, divorce, and sexuality, as well as pregnancy and motherhood. All the women mentioned in the following section are currently included in the exhibition sample.<sup>25</sup>

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21 Research was conducted with the help of several service contract workers in the holdings of the Higher Regional Courts (OLG) in Hamm, Hamburg, Jena, Kassel, Munich, Saxony, and Stuttgart, as well as the Regional Court of Berlin.

22 Systematic research was conducted in the holdings of the Special Courts in Berlin, Hamburg, and Munich. In addition, individual files from other Special Courts were also evaluated.

23 Additional perpetrator sources include personnel files from prisons, police records, and others, as well as egodocuments from the victims, including writings from the time of persecution, as well as legacies and interviews conducted with survivors. Compensation claims submitted in the GDR and the Federal Republic were also taken into account.

24 Thomas Roth, “‘Gestrauchelte Frauen’ und ‘unverbesserliche Weibspersonen’: zum Stellenwert der Kategorie Geschlecht in der nationalsozialistischen Strafrechtspflege”, in *Nationalsozialismus und Geschlecht. Zur Politisierung und Ästhetisierung von Körper, “Rasse” und Sexualität im “Dritten Reich” und nach 1945*, eds. Elke Frietsch and Christina Herkommer (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009), 109-140, here: 110.

25 It is an ongoing project, so changes may still occur.

## Gender-specific aspects in the sources

### *Marriage and citizenship*

First, let us return to Judith Auer. Like many other women who were active in the resistance, she evidently did not fulfil the role assigned to her from the perspective of the Nazis. The political sphere was reserved for men; hence the failure of her marriage due to her long-standing political involvement presumably appeared both logical and yet reprehensible to her persecutors. According to Nazi propaganda, women should above all support their husbands. Assuming a political role was at best reserved for them in the Nazi girls' and women's organisations.<sup>26</sup> However, from the viewpoint of the Nazi state, their primary task, at least until the start of the war, was to take care of the household and children.<sup>27</sup> Marriage, which was already presented to young girls as the only desirable form of coexistence between the genders, held special significance in Nazi ideology as the nucleus of the so-called *Volksgemeinschaft*.<sup>28</sup> As a result, divorce was extremely problematic for many women, especially if they were deemed the guilty party in the proceedings. Although the divorce in Auer's case was pronounced by mutual consent, she became an unmarried or divorced woman in a society where single women were not envisaged. Often, divorce was not only associated with a loss of status but could also have direct economic consequences for the woman – for instance, if the man was the sole breadwinner and had financially supported the woman and/or the family.

In Nazi Germany, citizenship, which was accompanied by certain rights, also played a crucial role in this context. For women who had acquired their husband's citizenship through marriage, divorce could mean the loss

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26 See, for example, Dagmar Reese ed., *Die BDM-Generation. Weibliche Jugend in Deutschland und Österreich im Nationalsozialismus*, Potsdamer Studien 19 (Berlin: Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 2007).

27 With the start of World War II, gender roles shifted in some areas. Women were now increasingly employed as workers in war-related industries or at the front. This gave them access to fields of activity that were largely new for women. The conditions for resistance against the regime also changed accordingly.

28 This primarily refers to the desired marriages among *Volksgenossen*, people considered to be of the same race and nationality in National Socialist ideology. Regarding divorces and consequences, see: Annemone Christians, *Das Private vor Gericht: Verhandlungen des Eigenen in der nationalsozialistischen Rechtspraxis*, Das Private im Nationalsozialismus, Volume 2 (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2020).

of citizenship and, consequently, the loss of civil and residency rights.<sup>29</sup> Conversely, marriage could sometimes serve as a protective instrument: The actresses Therese Giehse and Erika Mann, who were a couple for a time, co-founded the The Pepper Mill (*Die Pfeffermühle*) cabaret in January 1933 with Erika's brother, the writer Klaus Mann, and their friend Magnus Henning. While in exile from 1933 to 1936, they toured Europe with the cabaret, which Therese Giehse and Erika Mann used as a medium to express their opposition to the Nazi regime. Due to their political opposition and their escape into exile, both lost their German citizenship in 1935. It was only after their marriage with two friends, who were homosexual British writers, that they were no longer considered stateless and could enter the USA in 1936.<sup>30</sup>

### *Sexuality/ies in court*

The marital status or the relationship of the accused women to their spouses/partners was always a central theme in the indictments and judgments of the Nazi courts. This illustrates the significance the courts attributed to the topic. The (sexual) relationships of the accused women received much more attention from the judges than those of the accused men. One recurring figure of discourse was the assumed fundamental (sexual) dependency of women on men as a motive or cause for their acts of resistance. The sexuality of women who entered into “forbidden relationships” with non-German forced or civilian labourers was treated particularly intensively and pejoratively.<sup>31</sup> Often, their husbands were serving as soldiers at the front or had already fallen.

29 Cf. Maren Röger, “Die Grenzen der ‘Volksgemeinschaft’: Deutsch-Ausländische Eheschließungen 1933-1945”, in *Geschlechterbeziehungen und “Volksgemeinschaft”*, eds. Klaus Latzel, Elissa Mailänder and Franka Maubach (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2018), 87-108.

30 Cf. Therese Giehse and Erika Mann, see: Gunna Wendt, *Erika und Therese: Erika Mann und Therese Giehse – Eine Liebe zwischen Kunst und Krieg* (Munich: Piper Taschenbuch, 2018); Jana Mikota, “‘Abgesehen von ihrer großen Begabung ist sie eine sehr warmherzige und natürliche Frau.’ Therese Giehse's Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus in der ‘Pfeffermühle’”, *Informationen* 63 (May 2006), ed. Studienkreis Deutscher Widerstand, 18-22.

31 Cf. Birthe Kundrus, “‘Die Unmoral deutscher Soldatenfrauen’ Diskurs, Alltagsverhalten und Ahndungspraxis 1939-1945”, in *Zwischen Karriere und Verfolgung. Handlungsräume von Frauen im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland*, eds. Kirsten Heinsohn, Barbara Vogel and Ulrike Weckel (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 1997), 96-110; Silke Schneider, *Verbotener Umgang. Ausländer und Deutsche im Nationalsozialismus. Diskurse um Sexualität, Moral, Wissen und Strafe* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 2010).

This was the case for Marianne Kürschner, for instance. Her husband died in May 1940 – just one month after their marriage – as a soldier in France. In the death sentence pronounced by the *Volksgeschichtshof* against the young woman in June 1943, her status as a “war widow” was repeatedly emphasised and used as an argument against her.<sup>32</sup> Kürschner, a technical draftswoman from Saxony, was only 22 years old at this point. She worked in an arms factory in Berlin, where she befriended Czech workers. Left to fend for herself after her husband’s death, she engaged in various relationships with male Czech colleagues and became pregnant. All of this is included in the justification for her sentence, even though she was arrested and convicted primarily for making critical remarks and jokes about the regime during working hours.<sup>33</sup> The judges clearly reached the limits of their understanding of gender roles when assessing Kürschner’s sexuality. “It may well be that Mrs. Kürschner was dominated by the influence of the Czech men [...] But whilst the People’s Court acknowledges that in sexual relationships and their consequences the man is responsible – in this case, Mrs. Kürschner cannot avail herself of this argument.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, although self-determined female sexuality essentially does not exist for the judges, Kürschner alone is held accountable for her actions. The fact that she entered into a relationship with a Czech man is deemed particularly reprehensible by the Court, which equates it to a “betrayal” of her husband who died a “heroic death”: “[...] by engaging in relationships with several Czech men, she has defiled the honour of her fallen husband.”<sup>35</sup> It is all too evident that the court condemned Marianne Kürschner not only legally but also morally.

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32 Judgement against Marianne Kürschner, 26 June 1943, 1-2, BArch R 3018/3670.

33 The judgement includes the following joke she is said to have told: “The Führer once had the Reich Marshal show him Berlin, the airport, the east-west axis, and then both climbed the radio tower. There, the Führer said Berlin was so beautiful, and he would like to give the Berliners a treat; Hermann then said, ‘well, then jump from the tower’”; cf. Judgement against Marianne Kürschner, 26 June 1943, 1-2, BArch R 3018/3670.

34 *Ibid.*, 4.

35 *Ibid.*



Fig. 3: Marianne Kürschner, around 1953. (Source: Sächsisches Staatsarchiv, 30413 Bezirkstag/Rat des Bezirkes Karl-Marx-Stadt, 57196.)

### *Pregnancy and motherhood*

Pregnancy as a physical event and motherhood as a social occurrence are two additional central themes that some women in the resistance had to confront and that are present in the sources. In addition to documents such as interrogations, charges, and judgements, which primarily reflect the perspective of the prosecuting authorities, the court records also contain personal testimonies such as letters written in detention or pleas for clemency. They highlight the dilemmas many women faced when choosing to resist. Concerns for their partners, as

well as for their already-born or unborn children, are a recurring theme.<sup>36</sup> And this concern was not unfounded, as the consequences of an act of resistance for (expectant) mothers could indeed be severe. In the event of their imprisonment, pregnant women faced significant health risks for themselves and their unborn children.<sup>37</sup> Marianne Kürschner also submitted a plea for clemency citing her pregnancy, concluding with the following words: “I beg for mercy, for the sake of my already beloved child, my dear parents, and my youth.”<sup>38</sup> However, her plea was rejected, and she gave birth to her son Josef in prison in September 1943. Josef died just a few weeks later.<sup>39</sup>

36 Cf. also the secret message from Liane Berkowitz to her mother, smuggled out through a prison guard. Berkowitz was sentenced to death in January 1943 as part of the trials against the “Red Orchestra,” even though she was still a minor and pregnant at the time. In the letters to her mother, she describes, among other things, her concern for family members and the unborn child, as well as the health difficulties she faced as a pregnant woman in custody, Tuchel (2022), 237-243 and 369-419. Some letters are transcribed in the volume.

37 Cf. also Helga Amesberger, “Schwangerschaft und Mutterschaft während der Verfolgung,” in *Zwischen Mutterkreuz und Gaskammer. Täterinnen und Mitläuferinnen oder Widerstand und Verfolgung?* eds. Andreas Baumgartner and Jean-Marie Winkler (Vienna: Edition Mauthausen, 2008), 21-26.

38 Clemency plea from Marianna Kürschner, 22 July 1943, BArch R 3018-8934.

39 Notification of the death of Marianne Kürschner’s child, 24 December 1943, BArch 3018/1919.

Only after her child's death did further appeals for clemency from her and her parents succeed. In early 1944, Reich Minister of Justice Otto Thierack commuted her death sentence to an eight-year prison term. Kürschner survived the lengthy imprisonment and was liberated from Jauer Prison by American troops in April 1945. She returned to her hometown, Elsterberg, in Saxony, and remarried in 1948. Kürschner initially made a living as a taxi driver; she later worked for the Association of Persecutees of the Nazi Regime (*Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes* – VVN) in the GDR.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to documents outlining the perspectives of both the persecutors and the mothers, testimonies of the children themselves have in some cases also been preserved. These include both petitions for clemency they wrote for their incarcerated mothers during the Nazi era and memoirs published after the end of the war. In 2004, Ruth Hortzschansky, Judith Auer's daughter, published a book about her mother's story with her husband Günter. It is titled "May everything that was painful not have been in vain" and includes transcripts of the letters Judith Auer sent to her daughter from prison. The volume impressively illustrates how profoundly the persecution of women in the resistance affected subsequent generations. Ruth Hortzschansky concludes that the "life and struggle" of her mother always shaped her own life. She describes how she is always reminded of the last encounter with her mother whenever she passes the location of the former women's prison on Barnimstrasse in southeast Berlin<sup>41</sup>: "And behind this ruin was the prison where she was incarcerated. In this women's prison on Barnimstrasse – like the factory ruin, it has been demolished for many years – I saw my mother for the last time."<sup>42</sup> After her mother's arrest, Ruth was initially hidden by Judith Auer's sister Gabriele. She only learned about her mother's execution on her 15th birthday, several weeks later. Judith Auer had concealed her conviction from her daughter during their last meeting in prison to protect her. When asked by the Gestapo in an interrogation in 1944 if she felt remorse, Judith Auer replied: "[...] I believed that I had to contribute to the elimination of the current regime in Germany and only feel remorse insofar as I should have given some consideration to

40 Compensation file of Marianne Kürschner, Sächsisches Staatsarchiv, 30413 Bezirkstag/Rat des Bezirkes Karl-Marx-Stadt, 57196.

41 Claudia von Gélieu, *Barnimstrasse 10: Das Berliner Frauengefängnis 1868-1974* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2014).

42 Ruth Hortzschansky and Günter Hortzschansky, "Möge alles Schmerzliche nicht umsonst gewesen sein": *Von Leben und Tod der Antifaschistin Judith Auer (1905-1944)*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: trafo, 2017), 9.

my daughter.”<sup>43</sup> Aenne Saefkow, her friend and comrade, later wrote in her memoirs that Judith Auer died with a photo of her daughter in her hand.<sup>44</sup> While the space here does not allow for a closer examination of the reception history of women in the resistance, it can be posited that the social role of mothers in particular is often emphasised as is shown, for example, by an article about Judith Auer published in 1947 in the GDR daily newspaper *Neues Deutschland*. It is titled: “Always let yourself be guided by love. A mother’s letter before her execution.”<sup>45</sup>

However, such a focus on the topic of motherhood carries the risk of reducing the lives and acts of resistance of women to presumed female-specific areas, with a moralising effect that should not be underestimated. Not all women who resisted were mothers or lived in heterosexual partnerships. And, of course, men were also affected by the loss of their partners and children. At the same time, children and pregnancy were factors that were significantly more relevant for women and could influence their decision to resist to a much greater extent. In this regard, women’s circumstances were markedly different from those of men. It can be assumed that in the 1930s and 1940s, women were still predominantly responsible for caring for and raising their children. They faced the risk that, in case of imprisonment, their children would be placed in foster families or forcibly adopted. Children were also used as a deliberate means to put pressure on women, as in the case of female Jehovah’s Witnesses, who, according to Detlev Garbe, were blackmailed by persecutors with the threatened forcible adoption of their children.<sup>46</sup>

## The exhibition

A fundamental research finding from the examination of the sources carried out by our project team for more than four years is that the resistance

43 Quote from the interrogation of Judith Auer by the Gestapo on 22 July 1944, 10, BArch R 3018-1558 T.1.

44 Memories of Aenne Saefkow about Judith Auer, undated, BArch (VVN estate), DY 55.

45 Cf. *Neues Deutschland*, 12 September 1947, “Lass dich stets von der Liebe leiten”. Brief einer Mutter vor ihrer Hinrichtung, BArch, (VVN-Nachlass), DY 55.

46 Detlev Garbe, “Kompromißlose Bekennerinnen. Selbstbehauptung und Verweigerung von Bibelforscherinnen”, in *Frauen gegen die Diktatur – Widerstand und Verfolgung im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland*, ed. Christl Wickert (Berlin: Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, 1995), 52-73, here 58-59.

of women is not limited to a specific political ideology, a specific role, or individual actions. Women were present in almost all groups and areas in which men also resisted, albeit to a greater or lesser extent. Examples can be found even in militant and armed resistance, which has long been attributed solely to men. For instance, women such as Erika von Tresckow<sup>47</sup> participated in the coup attempt of 20 July 1944, or supported the Republic in the Spanish Civil War, as did Irma Götze.<sup>48</sup> They engaged in rebuilding illegal political structures, as did Judith Auer, resisted the regime for religious reasons, and assisted Jewish and other persecuted individuals. The goal of the exhibition is accordingly to depict a broad range of acts of resistance and ideological orientations.

At the same time, the exhibition does not claim to be representative. This would be beyond the scope of the project. Although we had more than enough women we could have shown, we had to reduce our sample. The current plan is to show 32 women with their short biographies and acts of resistance. Such an exhibition should be easy to understand and accessible, too much information would be a barrier for some visitors. Our team focuses on women who acted in Germany, including some who went into exile in 1933. Showing the resistance of women in annexed or occupied territories would also be very interesting, but was not possible in the time and space we had available.

The women whose biographies and actions are included in the exhibition provide a good insight into the diversity of personal backgrounds, life situations, and political orientations of women who resisted. The exhibition thus follows the premise of not making statements about "the women" in the resistance; instead, the focus is on individuals and their specific circumstances.

Visitors to the exhibition will probably first notice the large portraits of individual women, each of which is vertically mounted on a table and accompanied by a brief biography. On the side of the table, a vertical caption aims to arouse curiosity. On the surface of the table, a horizontal introductory text describes the particular act of resistance. Beside it, a maximum of two images illustrate the resistance of the woman who is featured.

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47 Cf. "Den Umsturz planen", Was konnten sie tun?, <https://www.was-konnten-sie-tun.de/themen/th/den-umsturz-planen/>.

48 Cf. "Irma Götze", Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, [https://www.gdw-berlin.de/vertiefung/biografien/personenverzeichnis/biografie/view-bio/irma-goetze/?no\\_cache=1](https://www.gdw-berlin.de/vertiefung/biografien/personenverzeichnis/biografie/view-bio/irma-goetze/?no_cache=1).



Some of the gender-specific aspects mentioned above are also taken into account here. In this manner, the exhibition avoids attributing specific areas to women based on their gender. Instead, the focus is on the individual circumstances, risks, and dilemmas in each biography. After all, as Gisela Bock aptly put it, women do not share the same history solely because of their gender: among women “in National Socialism, the differences were as extreme as those between life and death”.<sup>49</sup> Additional texts in the exhibition, which are not explicitly assigned to individual women, explain the broader framework conditions. These include, for example, the National Socialist view of women, the roles designated for women, as well as individual risks and consequences of resistance, to make visitors aware of the historical context in which the featured women acted.

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49 Bock, “Ganz normale Frauen”, 245.

# WER IST WALTER?

Resistance against Nazism, fascism, occupation and collaboration occurred throughout Europe during World War II. But how much do we know about this history in other European countries? Gathering 32 contributions and case studies on the history of this resistance, as well as on its transmission after 1945, especially in museums, the present book is an invitation to look at resistance in Europe in an interdisciplinary, international, transnational and comparative perspective. It is the result of the international research project “Wer ist Walter? Resistance against Nazism in Europe” which gathered historians, curators and other researchers mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France and Germany.



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