The Nazi regime took control of Germany in 1933. At this pivotal moment in history, Berlin was the cultural and intellectual center of Germany. One of the great European capitals, Berlin was home to museums, concert halls, the famous Tiergarten. A mere fifteen years later, the city was a virtual wasteland, diminished to rubble and smoke. The once majestic Berlin was ravaged by the violence and destruction of the Second World War. Beyond just the ruination of the physical landscape, the people of Berlin were utterly devastated, reduced to “mere shadows of human beings.” While war may conjure images of tanks and guns, soldiers and generals, another side of combat exists. The home front is a universal element of war: a realm dominated by women, children, and the elderly. Berlin was no exception, overwhelmingly populated by women during World War II. Although their gender spared them from the horrors facing soldiers on the battlefields of Europe, women too witnessed a heavy barrage of wartime atrocities. The Second World War was a conflict that was indiscriminate in the reach of its brutalities.

World War II has all but faded from immediate memory, drifting instead to the pages of history books. Amongst these texts exists a special breed more rich, more compelling, than the rest. Personal accounts of the war, narratives composed from diaries and recollections, are uniquely adept at conveying the realities of war; they resonate more deeply than a timeline or secondhand version of the war possibly could. Helga Schneider, Christabel Bielenberg, and a woman known only as Anonymous, each published an account of her experiences living in Berlin during the war. These three women hailed from entirely different backgrounds: their age, education, employment, and social status all varied. The unique vantage points represented in these women’s stories offer glimpses of a Berlin marred by war and violence; a Berlin where politics lost meaning, food became a rarity, and sex, a currency born of desperation. Perhaps most significant, these women reveal a Berlin whose traditional cultural values were in a state of upheaval. The women this paper will study witnessed and participated in a wartime transformation of gender relations. Each woman saw traditional German gender ideals – ideals that were eventually espoused by the Nazi regime – universally give way to the daily demands of the home front and the more pressing fight to survive. German women were forced to reconcile prewar gender expectations with the unavoidable adoption of war-specific roles. Furthermore, war demanded that these women reexamine the meaning of masculinity in the context of a feminine home front. Anonymous, Schneider, and Bielenberg represent three distinct examples of women who acquired new wartime roles and witnessed other women do the same. This paper will present a brief history of twentieth-century German gender relations in order to evaluate the transformation of gender relations seen within these women’s personal narratives. The collective experiences of these women demonstrate the limits of the traditional German gender ideals of a male breadwinner and a female housewife in a wartime environment where survival demanded women’s acquisition of supplementary and nontraditional roles.

Prior to World War I, German culture tended towards a traditional perspective on gender relations. A woman’s place was in the home; her primary role was as a mother. Nancy Reagin explained in Sweeping the German Nation, “The evolution of gender roles in German society during the late nineteenth century produced an ideal of the ‘German’ housewife, household, and domestic practices that became interwoven with Germans’ national identity.” The feminine ideal was dependent on men’s ability to earn money and support their families. This “breadwinner-housewife” relationship defined Germany’s ideal family dynamic. Conventional gender relations went largely unchallenged until World War I. The First World War began during an age of industrialization and rapid technological advancement. This climate facilitated an unprecedented amount of destruction in a short amount of time. Germany was inadequately prepared for the intensity of total warfare. As the war progressed, it was evident that any hope of success on the battlefront required the cooperation of the home front. In order to utilize the home front’s resources, the German government set the doctrine of domesticity aside and encouraged women to participate in the war effort. Women took positions in factories, in hospitals, and even “behind the lines,” as communications operators. The First World
War demanded a temporary realignment of gender roles as women were asked to assume positions that removed them from the home and contradicted the established prewar expectations for females.

The wartime agitation of gender roles was promptly quieted following Germany’s brutal defeat. After World War I, the newly instated Weimar Republic sought to right a broken nation. One of the key methods employed by the postwar government was a conscious realignment of gender roles. Germany’s loss had taken a toll on the returning troops. These men had failed to live up to the masculine ideals associated with soldiers; they had failed to protect and secure victory for their homeland. In her article “Home/Front: The Military, Violence and Gender Relations in the Age of World Wars,” Karen Hagemann explained, “After the war, the gender order, which had been disrupted by the particular requirements of total war, was reestablished with a vengeance […] because of its central significance for stabilizing the entire social order.”8 While the First World War may have offered German women some flexibility with their previously ascribed gender roles, the Weimar Republic aimed to regress to prewar gender dynamics. In a seemingly contradictory move, the Republic granted women legal equality in 1919.9 However, the intimidating political climate of the time meant that women were unlikely to publicly demand acknowledgement of their newly won rights.10 The Republic’s attitude was centered on the idea that, as Reagin explained, “Only a prewar standard of German domesticity could restore family life and thus, save the nation.”11

The Weimar Republic’s emphasis on a restoration of a traditional gender order in German society endured even after the fall of the Republic. The Nazi regime replaced the Weimar Republic in 1933, a power shift that marked a monumental turning point in the history of Germany. However, in the context of gender relations, this shift was less perceptible. Interwar Nazism generally extolled the same gender ideals as the Weimar Republic had previously.12 In Gender Relations in German History, Lynn Abrams outlined the Nazi perspective: “Men’s heroic, intellectual natures fitted them for a life of work, politics and courageous struggle, while women’s maternal, sentimental natures fitted them for motherhood and self-sacrifice in support of husband [and] family.”13 Nazism employed propaganda extensively to reinforce gender ideals in the continuing attempt to reestablish the prewar gender order. This propaganda included female-targeted radio programs that aimed “to nurture the idea of motherhood and the family.”14 Abrams wrote, “many of these [propaganda] techniques had been pioneered […] during the Weimar Republic and now came to inform the practices of a great deal of the Nazis’ broadcast propaganda.”15 The Nazi propaganda asserted women’s patriotic duty to revert to their prewar position in German society. Central to this idea was the pervasive attempt to charge women and other home front proprietors with the loss of the First World War. Placing the blame on women was a defensive measure: it allowed for the avoidance of postwar doubts concerning German ideals of masculinity and the integrity of the German army. By suggesting that the home front had let down German soldiers during the war, the returning men could more easily reinsert themselves into the societal hierarchy that unanimously placed men above women.

The efforts of the Nazi regime and gendered propaganda were largely successful in reasserting a gender hierarchy in interwar Germany. However, the nation’s entrance into the Second World War once again brought ascribed gender roles into question. As in World War I, German women were asked to contribute to the war effort. In a 1943 speech, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, Josef Goebbels, specifically “called upon all ‘German women’ to make a ‘sacrifice.’”16 However, the Nazi regime deviated from Germany’s approach to women’s wartime employment during the First World War. Hagemann explained:

The Nazi state filled the gap left by the male breadwinner’s military service far more successfully than the imperial German government had done. In so doing, it sought to preserve even in wartime the model of the ‘breadwinner-housewife’ […] Accordingly, Nazi propaganda clung to the pre-war model of womanhood, which permitted unmarried but not married ‘German women’ to work outside the home. The latter was relegated to their duties as housewives and mothers.17

Despite Nazi endeavors to retain a sense of domestic normalcy in Germany, the war soon permeated the home front and subverted prewar gender expectations.

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8 Hagemann and Shuler-Springorum, Home/Front, 4.
9 Ibid., 16.
10 Ibid.
11 Reagin, Sweeping the German Nation, 104.
12 Ibid., 13.
14 Ibid., 197.
15 Ibid., 194.
16 Hagemann and Shuler-Springorum, Home/Front, 1.
17 Ibid., 20.
During World War II, women’s survival on the female-dominated home front became increasingly dependent on their assumption of nontraditional responsibilities. In *The Bonfire of Berlin*, Helga Schneider wrote about her experience as a child in Berlin during World War II. Schneider’s narrative provides examples of women who took positions of leadership on the home front to compensate for the absence of men. Although Schneider was very young during the war, she was able to recognize a dramatic dismissal of previous German gender ideals. Schneider witnessed the women around her take on formerly masculine duties and responsibilities in order to survive in a war-torn Berlin, abandoning previously held gender expectations. Schneider’s age meant that she wholly relied on others to take care of her. In her account, women stepped forward to feed, protect, and comfort the children, the elderly, and the men deemed unfit to fight. These women effectively functioned as the primary breadwinners, protectors, and leaders of the home front.

At the very start of the war, Schneider was confronted with shifting gender roles. Both of her parents left Berlin to contribute to the war effort. Her father was conscripted by the German army in 1941.18 Although he was “a fervent antimilitarist,” his gender and health signified an implicit duty to participate on the front lines.19 Schneider explained that she had trouble comparing her pacifist father, an artist, to the heroic soldiers of Nazi propaganda: “It was difficult for me to reconcile him with my ideal.”20 While Schneider’s father was required to leave his family for the sake of the war, Schneider’s mother did so voluntarily. With blatant resentment, Schneider explained that her mother “convinced herself that serving the Führer’s cause was more honourable than raising her own children.”21 Her mother’s behavior is interesting because in order to serve the Nazi cause, she completely went against the Nazi ideal; she abandoned her role as a wife and mother entirely. Schneider’s mother and father both took on new roles in the context of war. Her father was forced to adhere to prescribed wartime gender roles. As a soldier, he was assigned the singularly male task of protecting the home front and serving his country in battle. Schneider’s mother, in contrast, used war as a means of obtaining a position outside of the home, thus defying gender expectations and abandoning her prewar domesticity.

Schneider’s parents divorced during the war, drifting further from the prewar model of the ideal German family. Her father remarried just a few months later. Schneider’s stepmother, Ursula, became responsible for Schneider and her younger brother, Peter, while their father was on the front. Ursula was an adamant supporter of the Nazi regime. Her sister worked for the Ministry of Propaganda and, through this connection, Ursula arranged for Schneider and Peter to meet Hitler. Peter saw Hitler as a heroic figure; Schneider wrote, “It is his great dream to see the Führer. For him […] the Führer is God.”22 In contrast, Schneider was very much opposed to Hitler and Nazism. This is rather amazing considering that both of her parents were involved in the war and her stepmother was vocally very supportive of the Nazi regime. However, Schneider’s school headmistress proved to be a strong influence in shaping her political views. Schneider described her headmistress as a “passionate anti-Nazi [who] made no secret of it.”23 While Schneider modeled her headmistress’s beliefs; her younger brother wholeheartedly modeled their stepmother’s and seemingly bought-in to Nazi propaganda. Although her stepmother and headmistress held entirely different political beliefs, both women had to assume war-specific responsibilities. Schneider’s stepmother was expected to support Schneider and Peter, two children she had only known for a short time. Schneider’s headmistress was responsible for the well-being of an entire boarding school full of children, many of whom were orphans and had nowhere else to go once the war began. In this way, the war functioned as an equalizer for those left behind on the home front. Schneider’s narrative demonstrates that women of all ideological and social backgrounds took on new roles to survive in an environment of war.

Schneider spent most of the war – most of her early childhood – confined to the cellar of her apartment building. This cellar offered protection to Schneider’s family as well as many of her neighbors. With the exception of her brother and her stepmother’s father, nearly everyone with whom Schneider associated during the war was female. Schneider noted that women took on the roles of leadership within her cellar. She wrote, “Women […] had to assume the task of supplying water and food.”24 Females acted as the breadwinners in the environment of her cellar. They were tasked with waiting in the queues and organizing supplies; they protected and consoled their children and the elderly inhabitants of the cellar. Hagemann explained that this female leadership was not unique to Schneider’s experience: “Women left behind were forced more and more to replace the men […] by assuming responsibility for the livelihood and survival of their families.”25 Women’s survival on the home front was universally linked to their

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 9.
21 Ibid., 5.
23 Ibid., 39.
adoption of responsibilities formerly associated with men.

One of the more traumatizing aspects of Schneider’s childhood was her exposure to sexual violence. Schneider had never heard the word “rape” before the war. When Soviet soldiers began to occupy Berlin, Schneider wrote, “Although I didn’t actually know what it meant, there was much talk of rape.” She saw the rape of several girls in her cellar by Soviet soldiers. Schneider eventually witnessed the death of one of these girls, a result of the significant blood loss she sustained. As a child and as a female, these experiences had an intensely negative effect on Schneider’s feelings towards men. She wrote, “I decided that no man would ever touch me, men were nothing but ferocious beasts.” Schneider noted that only the female occupants of the cellar attempted to defend the young girls from the Soviet soldiers; the male occupants failed to offer protection.

Schneider’s age during the war may have affected her response to Nazi propaganda. The images she was bombarded with at the start of the war, images of heroic soldiers, the ideal protectors, simply did not hold up to the realities of her experience. Virtually orphaned by the war, Schneider faced the trauma of growing up underground, in a Berlin where men were nearly absent. Both the men on the front and the men at home failed to protect German women from the horrors of war. Schneider witnessed a diminishment of German masculinity as a whole. She, however, also bore witness to strong-minded women, like her stepmother and her headmistress. These women functioned as Schneider’s protectors when the men could not. Schneider saw an entire city of women step up to fill the void left by men on the front. Even as a child, Schneider could recognize the significant changes that occurred in terms of gender roles and expectations during the war.

Schneider witnessed women around her take on wartime roles rather than acquiring a new role herself. Christabel Bielenberg, in contrast, took on a supplementary wartime role and also witnessed other women assume uniquely war-related responsibilities. In When I Was a German, Bielenberg wrote about her experiences as a woman involved with the Resistance during World War II. Bielenberg was a housewife before the war, although she opposed the idea that a women’s place should necessarily be confined to the home. During the war, Bielenberg remained a housewife but additionally assumed a war-specific role as a member of the Resistance. Her involvement with the Resistance was motivated by both her opposition to Nazism and her desire to expedite the end of the war. On the surface, Bielenberg personified the Nazi ideal of a woman and mother. Privately, in terms of her political ideology, she represented quite the opposite.

Bielenberg, her husband Peter, and their three children lived in Berlin from 1939 to 1943. When Bielenberg married Peter, a German lawyer, she was forced to forfeit her British citizenship and become a German citizen. This was not an identity that Bielenberg accepted with enthusiasm. In fact, her narrative is peppered with pointedly disparaging comments about Nazism and the values that the regime held as paramount. At one point, Bielenberg referred to Nazis as “crackpots.” Germany’s traditional views on gender relations were particularly hard for Bielenberg to swallow. Bielenberg wrote, “Independence, financial or otherwise, was not a state of affairs to be encouraged in a German woman; it might arouse and set in motion quite a number of disturbing phenomena which had up to date slumbered peacefully in the German social scene.” Bielenberg believed that the Nazi ideals concerning a woman’s place in society were archaic. However, as a woman living in Germany, she was expected to adhere to the Nazi’s female paragon. Because Bielenberg had a family and, thus, was “not a free agent,” she had to tread carefully, balancing a public identity as an upstanding German mother and another as an active member of the Resistance. One scene from her narrative perfectly demonstrates her ability to navigate between these contrasting spheres. One evening, Bielenberg played the role of a gracious hostess for some neighbors. She donned an apron, prepared a crayfish dinner, and politely attended to her guests. However, upon discerning that they too were against Nazi politics, the shutters were closed as English dancing music was put on and her husband performed unflattering impressions of Hitler.

The war acted as an avenue for women to take on political roles that were not necessary during peacetime. Through her connections with the Resistance, Bielenberg found herself in the company of many like-minded women who were similarly trying to toe the line between their public roles as wives and mothers and their private roles as resisters. These women each assumed war-specific roles that subverted their prewar identities as model German housewives. In another scene from her narrative, Bielenberg attended a luncheon with a handful of fellow Resistance women and, conspicuously, one very pro-Hitler woman. A resister named Mary, unaware that she was not entirely in the company of comrades, made several negative comments about Hitler. Mary’s comments were reported to the

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26 Schneider, The Bonfire of Berlin, 147.
27 Ibid., 163.
28 Christabel Bielenberg, When I Was a German, 1934-1945: An Englishwoman in Nazi Germany (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 47.
29 Bielenberg, When I Was a German, 76.
30 Ibid., 17.
31 Ibid., 113.
32 Ibid., 79.
authorities by the pro-Hitler woman. In the subsequent investigation, the other women all lied to protect Mary. Bielenberg wrote, “Nothing could seem more natural then than for eight respectable ladies to commit perjury most willingly and to swear that the fatal words complained of were just not spoken.” This instance presents a prime example of the shift in gender relations that Bielenberg witnessed during World War II. These “perjurers” were not concerned with fulfilling their duties to the Nazi regime by turning in Mary. Women resisters similar to Bielenberg conformed to Germany’s ideal gender roles before the war. However, during the war, these women acquired nontraditional roles by contributing to a movement that specifically aimed to obstruct Nazism, thus demonstrating the failure of the regime’s gender expectations to take precedence in a wartime environment.

The final narrative this paper will discuss presents perhaps the most dramatic example of shifting gender roles in Berlin. The narrative’s author, known only as Anonymous, experienced a near absolute reversal of gender roles. Her diary, an extraordinarily eloquent record of her wartime experience, was published in 1954 under the title A Woman in Berlin. Anonymous was a German woman in her early thirties when war broke out in her native Germany. Unlike Bielenberg and Schneider, Anonymous’s fight to survive led her to assume the role of the breadwinner and protector of her adopted wartime family: a widowed neighbor and the widow’s ailing male tenant. Anonymous resembles many of the women described in Schneider’s narrative, women who took on traditionally masculine roles during wartime. Like Schneider, Anonymous spent a fair amount of the war in the basement of her apartment building. This underground shelter was shared by both men and women. In Anonymous’s experience, women nearly exclusively took on the roles of leaders within their shelter community. She compared her shelter-mates to soldiers, the females acting as commanders. It is in this context of women’s wartime leadership that she wrote, “I have to relearn everything I’ve been taught about women in war.”

Anonymous’s recognition of the abandonment of prewar gender ideals is perhaps most clear in her descriptions of German soldiers. After it had become clear that Germany was nearing defeat, she encountered a number of soldiers to whom she referred as “miserable and powerless.”\(^43\) She later went as far as to call men in general “the weaker sex.”\(^46\) Her descriptions illustrate not a master-race army, but a group of men exhausted by the trials of war. Indicating her disappointment in Nazism and its notions of the heroic male ideal, Anonymous wrote, “the Nazi world – ruled by men, glorifying the strong man – is beginning to crumble, and with it the myth of ‘Man.’”\(^47\) Anonymous witnessed German men, still lickimg their wounds from the first Great War, struggling to recognize yet another loss. Illustrating their demoralization, she wrote, “Losing two world wars hits damned deep.”\(^48\) Once painted as heroes by Nazi propaganda, the men Anonymous saw were “all fought out.” Anonymous’s portrait of German men stands in stark contrast to the legion of German women that collectively rose to the occasion and took up wartime responsibilities that Nazi values would never have ascribed to them. Unlike Schneider and Bielenberg, Anonymous began the war supporting the Nazi regime. By the end of the war, Anonymous fully acknowledged the Nazi government’s failure to live up to its promises of an ideal Germany. Anonymous felt abandoned by the government that had subjected her to the grim realities facing women on the home front.

Sexual violence played a central role in the Anonymous’s wartime experience. She was the victim of rape by Soviet soldiers occupying Berlin. Eschewing any shred of self-pity, Anonymous eventually used sex as a way of obtaining food and protection; sex enabled her to fulfill her wartime role as the head of her pseudo family unit. This is certainly not what Goebbels had in mind when he called for women to make sacrifices at the beginning of the war.\(^40\) According to Anonymous, rape was a “collective experience” for German women.\(^41\) Women asked each other about their encounters with rape as they would ask each other about the weather. This extreme normalization of sexual violence is a testament to the degree of suffering women on the home front endured. Anonymous relayed one conversation with a friend of hers in which, before the word “rape” could even escape her lips, her friend hastily responded, “Only once, the first day.”\(^42\) When comparing the Nazi feminine ideal to a body of women that openly discussed their experiences with rape, the limitations of prewar gender ideals are obvious.

Anonymous expressed a universal concern that German women had for keeping knowledge of their rape experiences from their husbands on the front. There was a general agreement amongst these women that their men would view them as tainted if they knew that they had been raped. This was a reality that Anonymous faced upon her.

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\(^{41}\) Bielenberg, When I Was a German, 93.


\(^{43}\) Ibid., 42.

\(^{44}\) Ibid.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 43.

\(^{46}\) Anonymous, A Woman in Berlin, 255.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{48}\) Hagemann and Shuler-Springorum, Home/Front, 1.

\(^{49}\) Anonymous, A Woman in Berlin, 147.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 163.
fiancé’s return from the front. He treated Anonymous with disgust; she wrote, “For him I’ve been spoiled once and for all.” This reaction might best be attributed to returning soldiers’ reluctance to acknowledge their failure to defend the home front. Hagemann addressed this sentiment: “The conscripted men no longer functioned as ‘breadwinners.’” As the war went on they also became increasingly ineffective as ‘protectors.’” Rather than respond with guilt to the acts of sexual violence experienced by German women, German men outwardly responded with repulsion. Men like Anonymous’s fiancé failed to admit their inability to live up to their gender ideal while criticizing German women for the same deficiency.

Anonymous, Bielenberg, and Schneider each witnessed a dramatic shift in gender expectations during the Second World War. Anonymous assumed the role of a breadwinner, Bielenberg balanced her duties as a housewife and a resister, and Schneider depended on the women around her to protect and support her. Their individual experiences, when taken together, illustrate the extensive effect World War II had in altering gender relations on the home front. Although Germany’s longstanding gender traditions and ideals were tested by the First World War, the Weimar Republic and the successive Nazi regime reintegrated gender ideals into interwar German society. However, as these narratives demonstrate, even the seemingly indestructible Nazi regime could not maintain a strict gender order in Germany during wartime. Women were forced to assume formerly masculine roles in order to survive the harsh realities of the home front. The Second World War was a conflict that affected people of all ages, family situations, and nationalities. Beyond individually altering the people of Berlin, the war disrupted the entire social structure and gender order of German society. Male soldiers may have carried guns and walked battlefields, the women on the home front faced a war of their own, a war of survival, that necessitated a departure from traditional German gender ideals.

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44 Hagemann and Shuler-Springorum, *Home/Front*, 3.