

*Sweeping the German Nation: Domesticity and National Identity in Germany, 1870–1945.* By Nancy R. Reagin (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007) 247 pp. \$75.00

Reagin writes that when Germany became a nation, it had no national anthem, no flag, and no postal system, among other markers or symbols of nationhood. It did, however, have a nation of hardworking housewives, who, in turn, had three (often embroidered) rallying cries: Cleanliness! Order! Thrift!

Reagin does not contend that German women “really did keep cleaner houses than their counterparts in other nations: we only know that many thought that they did so” (21). She does contend that private cleanliness became public Germanness.

In this impressive work, Reagin shows how German housewives comprised an “imagined community”—she credits Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York, 1983) for the phrase—strangers who did not know one another, yet felt connected. The tethers included a plethora of housewives’ organizations and women’s magazines, the latter including “endless embroidery and craft patterns, articles on how to pose children in photographs” that set standards by which a family could attain proper social status (hint: snow white linens are a must) (32).

Reagin notes that in general (pre–Third Reich), housewife groups and periodicals included bourgeois Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish women in their stern embrace, but excluded one group, rural women, who worked sixteen-hour days, apparently caring more about their fields than their parlors.

Amid the research, culled from English and German book sources, the aforementioned periodicals, and German archives, are some stunners. Late nineteenth-century advice manuals suggested that “a housewife should empty out and clean all shelves and cabinets at least once every eight days” (39). Why eight?

With guides about every domestic chore imaginable (there is only one proper way to hang up socks to dry, although we do not learn what it is), Germans could draw on family life and domesticity, and its symbols and practices, writes Reagin, “to sustain the national community under successive political regimes” while things like geographical boundaries were swept clean away (15).

The main sweepers, of course, were the National Socialists, whose supporters not infrequently were leaders within the housewives groups. *Sweeping the German Nation* contains tale after tale of how the Nazis cynically co-opted the housewives (willing or not), pushing them to eat, not to eat, buy, not to buy, wear, and not to wear, whatever healthy or shoddy

product was in great or short supply. Many notions of thrift, admittedly, were downright ecological, if extreme (hair in hairbrushes was collected and used for felt manufacturing). Meanwhile, the women were encouraged to procreate, and keep house.

Multiple offspring were not the sole criteria for winning the famous Mother's Cross. Recipients had to keep an orderly home; no fecund slattern need apply. One woman was even denied a cross in part because "her sister is not a good housekeeper" (134). The Nazis' most bizarre cleanliness = good German manifestation must have been Hashude, a camp in Bremen. Behind a barbed-wire fence stood little houses where untidy Hausfrauen (and their families) were sent to live under a kind of Haus-arrest until they literally cleaned up their act.

To the Nazis, there was no cleansing like ethnic cleansing. Reagin's final chapter involves the "macabre sort of terrain" that was Poland. After displacing or murdering Poland's Jewish and other undesired populations, the Nazis replaced them with presumed "Volksdeutschen," people from conquered eastern territories who *may* have had "German blood," did not necessarily speak German, nor necessarily want to learn how to make German preserves or stitch German samplers. Legions of young German women assigned such tasks within the "Germanization" of Poland were often self-righteous but sometimes baffled. A Polish woman had the temerity to tell one of them, "So what if her children were dirty? They would still grow up." The scornful phrase "Polish management" (*polnische Wirtschaft*) arose then.

*Sweeping the German Nation* has a few minor editorial and compositional problems (for example, Reagin mentions Sedan Day five times before explaining it, and the index is too brief), but Reagin's scholarship is stunning, her findings chilling, and her warning implicit:

Be aware of the "intricate minuet" making up the "public" and "private" in any political system.

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