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In this comprehensive overview and analysis of life under Nazi rule, Beverly Chalmers brings together a vast array of women’s voices and experiences. By focusing primarily on topics such as forced reproduction and sterilization, love, sexuality, rape, and abuse, Chalmers adds to a growing body of literature that examines the horrors specific to women during the time of the Third Reich. The Holocaust, while universally recognized as one of the most atrocious events of the modern era, was not the same for men as it was for women. Texts such as this do the important work of unearthing the specific form of terror inflicted upon women.

*Birth, Sex and Abuse* not only describes the general conditions for women whose reproductive rights were taken away, but also provides specific narratives from an outstanding collection of archival sources. The juxtaposition of journal entries from Holocaust survivors and women forced into ghettos alongside startling statistics provides readers a unique perspective – a perspective that is both vast and specific at the same time. Chalmers does an impressive job negotiating and respecting the stories told by survivors in order to convey the brutality of the Nazis while also avoiding sensationalism or gratuitous violence. Also notable is the fact that Chalmers does not limit her discussion to the lives of Jewish women; she includes the experiences of non-Jewish, German women. Forced into excessive reproduction as a means of furthering the Aryan race, or abortion as a means of preventing any impurities among true Germans, German women’s bodies were also often out of their own control.

In Part 1 of the book, “Pregnancy and Childbearing,” Chalmers explains the methodology and thinking behind Nazi genetic, eugenic and euthanasia programs and the early stages of racial purification. The desire for a pure Aryan race began dividing the country in 1933 by forcing divorce upon married interfaith couples, limiting Jewish
doctor’s access to non-Jewish patients, and propagating lies about Jewish people’s inferiority and racial and biological differences. The next stage was a joint venture of forcibly encouraging German women to breed more “pure” German babies while also at the same time forcing abortion and sterilization on Jewish women, unsuitable, non-“Aryan” Germans, and other social or racial undesirables. The nine reasons for the sterilization were: congenital feeblemindedness, schizophrenia, manic-depressive psychosis, hereditary epilepsy, Huntington’s chorea, hereditary deafness, blindness, severe deformity, or severe alcoholism. Approximately 95% of sterilizations were performed based on the first four categories; the most popular reason for sterilization, and the one most open to interpretation, was feeblemindedness, which was the cause for 53% of sterilizations (p. 26). As the number of sterilizations increased, so did the sterilization centers. At these centers, eugenicists and psychiatrists offered “expert” medical advice, and created doctrines and laws furthering the sterilization process. The Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring claimed that sterilization “must be performed even against the will of the person to be sterilized.” Furthermore, because “sterilization is the only safe method to prevent the inheritance of mental disease and serious genetic disorders, the law must be looked upon as an expression of loving care for the coming generations, and as an act of altruism” (p. 29). In total, the sterilization program implemented by the Nazis victimized approximately 350,000-400,000 men, women, Jews, Gypsies, and “Rhineland bastards” throughout Germany.

When sterilization did not reach an “undesirable” in time, euthanasia became the next logical step. The methods of killing undesirable persons included gassing, starvation, and chemical abuse. Mercy killings of mentally ill children began in 1939 under the Reich Committee for Hereditary Health matters as an act of wartime service. And the T4 program, a complex organization dedicated to eradicating “burdensome life” and “useless eaters,” was a euthanasia program targeted at adults. Here, the steps from eugenics and euthanasia to the Final Solution can be seen. While not a clear cut transition from one to the next, many of the doctors trained in the T4 program became top level administrators.
of the death camps and moved from killing tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of victims.

At the same time the aforementioned programs were occurring, so too were programs dedicated to increasing the numbers of “pure” Aryan children. Birthing centers grew, as did new laws concerning divorce and allowances for extramarital affairs. German women were encouraged to bare as many children as possible and these efforts were considered their wartime military support. Conversely, Jewish women were forbidden from having children and when pregnancy was discovered, abortions were forced upon unwilling women. Many women died from botched abortions and when the pregnancy was too far along for an abortion to occur, Jewish babies were killed almost immediately. The description of life in the ghettos and camps, wherein these murders occurred, is well documented by Chalmers. Throughout the sections “Ghettos, Hiding, And Elsewhere,” “Concentration Camps” and “The Medical Profession And Reproduction” readers get both detailed accounts of such murders, often in the words of witnesses or those who experienced such abuse, as well as the startling statistics and comprehensive history of the events.

Part 2, “Sexuality And Sexualized Abuse” adds to the depth and understanding of the different sorts of abuse women faced under Nazi rule. Here Chalmers specifically discusses topics such as rape, sexual humiliation, and sexual abuse. A fascinating aspect of Nazi control over reproduction and sexuality was that before Nazi control, women in Germany had been gaining control over their sexuality and reproduction like never before. Increasing amounts of birth control and education about reproduction were occurring in the early part of the 20th century; when the Nazis came to power, that knowledge was taken out of the hands of women and given to those with a plan for a pure race. Sex was used to serve national goals and the previous sexual liberation that had happened ceased to exist. Except perhaps when it came to those in power; new laws concerning extramarital affairs and prostitution emerged allowing men the freedom they desired. Brothels and prostitution within concentration camps, or just outside of them,
became the norm. However, debates still remain as to the role Jewish women had as prostitutes. Due to laws forbidding contact, some scholars claim that the forced prostitution of Jewish women was rare, whereas others argue it occurred far more than commonly acknowledged. It is exactly within these sorts of debates that Chalmers writing, research, and attention to detail shines. She effectively negotiates both sides of the argument and in doing so provides specific voices from the past and present.

Throughout *Birth, Sex and Abuse*, Chalmers’ meticulous record of events, stories and untold atrocities provides readers with access to a new understanding of the horrors of the Holocaust. The impressive bibliography and collection of notes at the end further provides readers access to an underrepresented topic in Jewish history. In all, it is an excellent addition to classes about Jewish history or Women and Judaism and for anyone interested in Holocaust studies.