Victor Klemperer, A Jew but also a Man: The Importance of Understanding German-Jewish Masculinities in the Third Reich

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Abstract

This essay examines the Third Reich diaries of Victor Klemperer through the lens of gender. It argues for the importance of understanding the gendered constructions of Jewish male identity based on the experiences by Jewish men in Nazi Germany, their emasculation by Nazi policies and discourses, and the resulting attempts by Jewish men to re-negotiate new spaces for gender role performativity. Using the models of military and bourgeois masculinity, this essay articulates how Klemperer mirrored the cultural norms and ideals of German masculinity and how his understanding of and self-construction as a German-Jewish man transformed over the course of the Third Reich.

“I often tell myself that I was also in mortal danger in 1915. But here death threatens me in a more awful form.”

Victor Klemperer, May 31, 1942

A German-Jewish philologist employed at the Technical University of Dresden, Victor Klemperer (1880-1961) is remembered as one of the most important chroniclers of the history of the Third Reich. With an eloquent command of the German language, in his diaries Klemperer delves into minute detail, recording his observations on day-to-day life. His testimony is an example of a primary source that has vibrantly enriched our understanding of German-Jewish Alltagsgeschichte – the history of everyday life – under the Nazis and beyond. Henry Turner Jr. labels Klemperer’s journal as “by far the most important German diary of the century for social history.” Since their publication in the 1990’s, the Klemperer diaries have become part of the canon of German history on the Third Reich.

Historians’ common utilization of the diaries reflects the standard interpretation of Klemperer’s life as an emblematic representation of Jewish life in the Third Reich, and while the diaries have deepened our understanding of what it meant to be a Jew and to live under Hitler, the use of Klemperer’s Third Reich diaries is also problematic. Klemperer is commonly portrayed as a representative figure that represents a coherent and unified social body of German Jews. Strikingly, Klemperer, the diarist, is not described as a multi-faceted character that possessed more than the single Jewish identity that scholars tend to focus on. What is specifically lacking in the literature is a more gender-based analysis of Klemperer and his diaries. This study
contends that the author’s diaries constitute a body filled with gendered connotations and references that allude to the author’s self-understanding of what it meant to be a Jew and a man in the Third Reich. In addition to the categories of ethnicity, class, religion and age, with gender we have yet another means to understand how German Jews tried to cope with – and make sense of – their lives during the Third Reich. In this article, therefore, Victor Klemperer’s masculine identity will be scrutinized as an act of gender performativity. Examining Klemperer’s extant gender identity will reflect on how the Nazis challenged and ultimately transformed the two manifestations of his gender identity – military masculinity and bourgeois masculinity. It will also demonstrates that Klemperer’s self-understanding as a man dramatically changed through adaptation of gendered behaviors in the domestic and public spheres.

Coming out of feminist ideology and women’s studies commencing in the 1960s, important scholarship has been published on Jewish women, children and the family during the Holocaust, notably by Joan Ringelheim, Mario Kaplan, Myrna Goldberg, Dalia Ofer, and Nechama Tec. While historians first contended that Jewish women were remarkably successful in sustaining familial ties and female roles as mothers, wives and caregivers during the years of the Holocaust (and in concentration camps in particular), more recent studies have shifted towards issues of female victimization including physical abuse and sexual exploitation. Jewish men, however, as a distinct group of historical actors have as yet not received such attention. As Sharon Gillerman, Paul Lerner and Benjamin M. Baader aptly note:

Scholars have yet to provide a detailed analysis of what Nazi persecution meant for Jewish men as men, or to thematize the masculinity of Jewish men in Nationalist Socialist Germany in a systematic and sustained manner. Thus at this point, we have too little insight into the psychological impact of Nazi propaganda and policy, or of the experience of street violence, physical intimidation and humiliation, deportation, and life in the concentration camps on masculine self-identity in those years.

Studies on German masculinity in the 19th and 20th centuries have either focused little on German-Jewish men, or studies on German-Jewish masculinity have largely ignored the time of the Third Reich. Other studies that partially touch on the Third Reich have the character of scholarly surveys that discuss the specifics of military masculinity under Hitler to a lesser degree.
While research on German-Jewish masculinities has hardly begun, over the last few decades scholars have produced important studies on masculinities and linked them to fascism and the Third Reich. Raewyn Connell argues that the Nazi regime was strongly gendered and in its public face, intensely masculinized. National Socialism presented to the world a seamless front of dominant masculinity: hard, decisive, armed, modern, organized – the soldier image of the SA man. But masculinity in the Third Reich transcended that of the publicly visible “Aryan-German” soldier. Masculinity as a socially constructed and performed concept of what it means to be a man can be defined in various ways and includes conceptions of manhood that deviate from the dominant (hegemonic) image of the strong, Aryan man that the Nazis discursively circulated. This paper demonstrates that the story of German-Jewish men in the Third Reich was a different one; it featured a systematic emasculation of German-Jewish men but simultaneously also a contestation and adaptation by these men to sustain a degree of gender identity.

There are a number of ways to conceptualize gender and masculinity. Literature theories have allowed the historian to illuminate gender as constructed through performativity. According to Judith Butler, gender proves to be performative:

> The performance of a gender is compelled by norms that none of us choose. We work within the norms that constitute us as individuals. These norms are the condition for our agency, but they also limit our agency. So while there is an aspect of performance at play, this does not mean that the meaning of the performance is established by the intention of the actor – hardly. What are being performed are the cultural norms that condition and limit the actor in the situation.

Relying on works on gender identity construction by Judith Butler and Wendy Arons, Laura Deiulio has recently argued that for women, the concept of performativity offers a productive way to understand the history of women’s identities in the 18th-century. According to the author, women used performativity – the adherence of behavioral customs and norms – as a way of constructing their gendered identities. Women, in other words, as part of shaping their identities in society, internalized the social and cultural norms that were expected from them in their behaviors. This paper suggests that the useful metaphor of performativity should be utilized for (German-Jewish) historical studies on masculinity, too, since cultural definitions and social
productions of masculinity heavily rely on how they were translated and performed in everyday life. Examining historical discourses of gender in educational literature and other cultural productions alone is not sufficient; gender is primarily a lived experience that (social) historians need to better comprehend. Scrupulating Klemperer’s diaries and trying to conceptualize the author’s identity as a German-Jewish male can be realized by way of interpreting Klemperer’s diaries as an unconscious enactment by the author that vividly resembled the cultural established and lived gender norms of his time.

Understanding Klemperer the person in a more gendered way, however, requires first a contextualization of the author’s life in general. Victor Klemperer was born in 1880 in Landsberg an der Warthe in Eastern Prussia (today part of Poland). In 1891, the family moved to Berlin where his father was employed as a rabbi. In 1903, giving in to relentless pressure by his brothers, Klemperer converted to Protestantism in hopes of having better career chances later on, and, according to Peter Jacobs, to gain entry into the military. In 1906, he married the Protestant Eva Schlemmer. In 1913, he received a PhD at the University of Munich; from 1915 to 1918, he followed his calling for patriotic duty of citizenship and participated in World War I. A 1914 diary entry reads: “If the Russians are marching on to Berlin, I will register as a volunteer.” Klemperer served in the German army, though he participated in frontline battle only for the first year. In 1920, Klemperer was appointed as Professor of Romance Languages at the Technical University in Dresden where he worked until his dismissal in 1935. Following the events of Kristallnacht in November 1938, Klemperer was imprisoned for about a week. In 1940, together with his wife, Klemperer moved into the first of several Judenhäuser – houses reserved by the Nazis for Jews only – in Dresden where they both survived the war.

1. Military Masculinity

Gender historians who have written on masculinity have notably relied on the sociologist Raewyn Connell’s theory of “hegemonic masculinity.” In Joanne Nagel’s words,

An identifiable normative, or hegemonic masculinity, sets the standards for male demeanor, thinking and action. Hegemonic masculinity is more than an ideal; it is assumptive, widely held and has the quality of appearing to be natural. This is not say there is consensus among all men and women in any national setting about the ideal man. Indeed, hegemonic masculinity often stands in contrast to other class, race and sexuality-based masculinities. None the less, hegemonic
masculinity remains a standard - whether reviled or revered – against which other masculinities compete or define themselves.¹⁷

According to Annette Dietrich and Ljiljana Heisse, the hegemonic masculinity model is an innovative tool as it not only incorporates a relational character of masculinity vs. femininity, but because it further allows an analysis of how hegemonic masculinity constitutes relations of dominance and power among men themselves.¹⁸ The hegemonic masculinity model therefore can bring new insights into the plurality of gender identities and how “deviant” types of manhood simultaneously co-exist in the shadow of the dominant model, types that Connell coins marginalized and subordinate masculinity.¹⁹ Through a case study of Victor Klemperer’s diaries, we can scrutinize how German-Jewish men were pushed into the group of subordinate and marginalized men, despite their serious efforts to identify themselves as “normal” men who tried to adhere to the mainstream hegemonic model.

As George Mosse has argued, the ideal type of masculinity has changed little over time, and beginning in the 19th century as a sign of assimilation, German-Jewish men co-opted the German ideal type of masculinity.²⁰ Part of this hegemonic model was the concept of military masculinity that has received a fair share of scholarly attention in the last few years. The idea of military masculinity connotes the cultural codes of honor, respect and acknowledgment but also discipline, obedience to authority, strong will, perseverance and physical prowess, that, historically, men had hoped to acquire through military service. As Derek Penslar argues, military masculinity has much to do with recognition-seeking within public society and the nation through service in the army but should not be confused with an apotheosis of war itself.²¹ Beginning in the latter half of the 19th century, military service in Germany was paradigmatically linked to ways for gaining acceptance and recognition within public society, and, according to Ute Frevert and Karen Hagemann, a right for citizenship. In the second half of the 19th century, in the German states and Prussia in particular, this concept of citizen-soldier was widely adapted by most middle-class men and was further strengthened by popular discourses that associated military service with male honor and status.²² Most German-Jewish men were not immune to this trend of linking military service, German citizenship, and masculine identity. Gregory Caplan calls Jewish military service the final stage of the acculturation process by men who were
Victor Klemperer

seeking social inclusion into the rapidly modernizing and increasingly secularizing middle-class (Bürgertum).  

As German-Jewish men attempted to establish themselves as good citizens and true men, World War I proved to be a profoundly influential chapter in their lives. By taking up arms and trying to prove their worthiness in the defense of the Fatherland, many had hoped to receive acceptance by society and the state as equal citizens. Some later remembered the camaraderie in the army that transcended religious difference; although anti-Semitism had diminished neither during nor after the war, for the most part Jewish men recalled little anti-Semitism in the trenches. Yet, their contribution to the war preceded a cultural debate on the actual aptitude of Jewish men in the military. Since the late 19th century, state officials, intellectuals and religious leaders, Jewish and non-Jewish, have argued for and against allowing Jewish men into the newly emerging nation-state armies. Since the late 19th century and with a conflation of racial science and cultural antisemitic discourses, some argued that Jewish men were physically and mentally inferior and thus not suitable for military service. This discursive emasculation of Jewish men in Central Europe occurred during Klemperer’s years of childhood and adolescence, and it must have had an impact on him and his contemporaries. In addition to the discourses of physical inferiority (e.g. flat feet, weak composure), Jewish men were also associated with psychological disorders and mental deficiencies (such as a proneness to hysteria and nervousness) that at the fin-de-siècle were linked to typically female medical conditions. Klaus Hödl argues that the image of the effeminate Jew was a central facet of the anti-Semitic imaginations at the time. It is for this reason that such a proportionally high number of Jewish diarists and memoirists who were born in the late 19th century reflected on their sacrifices and merits in World War I during or following the Hitler era. In their personal reflections, as culturally emasculated men, at the very least, they hoped to prove some of these anti-Semitic counter-images to the hegemonic model false: physical degeneration, moral disorder, and sexual deviance.

In 1933, when the Nazis began singling out German Jews, Jewish men responded by pointing to their war service. Having (often voluntarily) put their lives in mortal danger and endured many sacrifices and deprivations, Jewish men re-enacted their war memories to challenge the current discriminations by the Nazi state and its attempt to exclude Jews from...
partaking in German public life. Moderately successful – World War I veterans were temporarily spared from a number of antisemitic laws and regulations\textsuperscript{26} – this defense tactic to cling to their wartime service furthermore carried a sense of collective commemoration and lingering comradeship. For most German-Jewish men including Klemperer, the 1930’s memory of World War I service helped to preserve a sense of dignity and pride, and was thus an integral part of in the process of constructing masculinity.

In his diary, Klemperer made several references to the Great War. As a former soldier, he drew emphatic parallels between his current situation and when he was stationed at the Western front.

I compare this dread of death with that in the field. This here is a 1000 times more horrible. There it was at worst the field of honor, there I was certain of every assistance were I to be wounded. Now – these horrible disappearances. What became of Friedheim? What happened to him, when he was dragged out of here? What happened in prison? How did he die? Snuffed out; drowned in the dirt after agonies. It is a thousand, a thousand times more horrible than all my fear in 1915.\textsuperscript{27}

It is striking that Klemperer used World War I as a reference point to compare the precarious situation he was in to the one in the trenches when his life had also been at risk. But his war service was remembered positively. Despite the danger he had been put in, he remembered that he enjoyed a collective sense of belonging and security; he had been certain of the care of his male comrades. Under the Nazis, the ex-soldier who had proven himself through courage and bravery before\textsuperscript{28} experienced an isolating fear that was aggravated through Friedheim’s, his friend’s mistreatment and disappearance. Bereft of a sense of collective security based on his wartime experience, Klemperer saw his identity as a man challenged. He juxtaposed his strongly gendered wartime service to his new identity as an isolated man who no longer could rely on the male camaraderie he had experienced in the trenches. While in the war there still had been true male heroism and camaraderie, the new ‘heroic’ soldier got described as: “brown storm troopers, whose task is merely to exercise brute force to assault political opponents at the rally and throw them onto the streets, as blood-soaked conquerors of a mighty enemy, as exemplary heroes of historic bar-room brawls.”\textsuperscript{29} To Klemperer, World War I heroism and military masculinity stood in stark contrast to the current times of artificial masculinity.
In the Third Reich, Jewish soldiers constructed World War I as a meaningful memory and affirming experience. Veterans like Klemperer, according to Derek Penslar, attempted “to perpetuate the memory of active participation in battle into the 1930s and 1940s, when they were deprived of their rights and, retroactively, their masculinity through the denigration, and then erasure, of their wartime valor and suffering.” The confiscation of icons and symbols that had been used to assign meaning to Jewish men’s past merits, such as war memorabilia and weapons, particularly after Kristallnacht, was paradigmatic for such an erasure and the emasculating process German-Jewish men had to endure. After the Gestapo conducted one of their occasional house searches, Klemperer noted on May 23, 1942, that his Service Cross went missing. Again, it seems that World War I carried a distinct symbolism within the generation of German-Jewish men who had fought in World War I – a total of over 100,000. Klemperer’s iconic loss of a war medal from World War I – recorded in a diary – thus, needs to be understood in gendered terms; more than anything, it symbolized the emasculation of German-Jewish men.

In addition to Klemperer’s introspective records of his daily life in the Third Reich, the diarist was also an astute and meticulous observer. In his notes, World War I is frequently referenced and through this act, Klemperer manifested his inherent belief in military masculinity. Klemperer portrayed a Jewish physician in Dresden, Dr. Katz, as someone who in his waiting room kept a World War I photo of himself in uniform, on horseback, wearing a monocle and the Iron Cross, First Class. As a couple, the Klemperers were quite outgoing, and Victor continued to meet new people. Typically, when he described someone in his diary whom he had met for the first time, he would make the habitual reference to the person’s service in World War I: “Yesterday at Marckwald’s. There we met Bernstein, a scraggly man, in his 50s, corn merchant, ended up as a medical orderly in the war, now male nurse.” Describing his female co-worker in the factory, he wrote: “My Frau Rudolph is a harmless creature. Her father fell in August 1914.” In the cellar during an air raid on Dresden, Klemperer met a Mr. Kautzsch, “an upright warden, definitively an old Social Democrat, definitively no Jew hater, former sergeant major (silver wounded-in-action medal, long decorations bar), Saxon, doing his best to speak proper German, not quite steady grammatically, good at explaining, usually good-naturedly pleasant.” It is from such quotes that we can determine how World War I remained a meaningful event in
Klemperer’s life and how intricately he linked his memory of military service to German manhood. Re-creating an image of himself as a former soldier in a state that was increasingly militarized, Klemperer tried to conform to the hegemonic ideals of masculinity. As Daniel Wildmann rightly pointed out, in the Third Reich there was an increased presence in the German media of the Aryan body that carried strong connotations of physical prowess and militarism. It is in this context of a militarized society that praised the ideal of the soldierly male that Klemperer’s World War I references need to placed and understood.

At the same time, Klemperer’s references to militarism served the purpose of assigning to the individual, emasculated Jewish man (including himself) more deserved honor, respect and authority. In Klemperer’s view, the individuals referred to in the diary were more manly because they had served in the war, received decorations and were perhaps even wounded. Klemperer hereby re-created a widely accepted social norm of German masculine identity that the Nazis tried to purge from German-Jewish men. Simultaneously and as a reaction, German-Jewish men to maintain an emotional membership in German society used the performativity of military masculinity as a tool. Years later, in June 1944, during an air raid – when truly one should have feared for one’s life – Klemperer described a little band of people in the cellar, very few men among them: “Cohn, Eisemann senior, Neumark chat to one another. Naturally about their war experiences 1914-1918. (A grotesque conversation really in a Jew’s cellar.) But it goes without saying that each one of us is attached to the German army of the First World War … with the same degree of passion.” Klemperer called it “the Jews’ favorite topic.” What he meant was the Jewish men’s favorite topic and by talking about the war, Jewish men assigned themselves a degree of respect and a sense of honor and authority.

Yet while the Jewish men’s construction of military masculinity defied and outlived Nazi oppression as a constituting element of their Jewish male identity, the unabashed discrimination against German-Jewish men continued. Klemperer learned about the fate of other Jewish men who had ended up at the Gestapo office and were never seen again. When a Frau Kreidl received a telegram from the SS about her husband, who had been imprisoned six months prior, the poor woman was informed that her husband had spent five months in the police jail and had then been transferred to Buchenwald where he was “shot while attempting to escape.” On another
occasion, Klemperer narrated the fate of a son and father who had ended up in the concentration camp Mauthausen. Both were also shot while “attempting to escape.” These cases demonstrate that violence against German-Jewish men could occur quite arbitrarily and with great force. Klemperer’s diaries contain few references to German-Jewish women being subject to any direct physical police brutality and SS terror (despite also being subject to anti-Semitic laws and regulations, psychological harassment and, in the end, deportation). In the early and mid-1930s in particular, it was mostly Jewish men who were physically victimized by the SS and police, who together exercised a hyper-militarized form of masculinity, including the uninhibited use of violence. Klemperer too became a victim of physical violence; he had to serve some time in jail and was physically beaten on another occasion when summoned to the local Gestapo office. He lamented: “Every day I ask myself whether I shall live to see the summer of 1943. The other men of the Jews’ house are all dead.”

In their physical attacks on Germany’s Jews, the Nazis further undermined masculine identities by instilling fear. The constant reality of living under police terror, potentially facing imprisonment and mistreatment, were psychologically excruciating; to minimize the danger of falling into the hands of the Gestapo, Jewish men and women increasingly withdrew into isolation. The implication for German-Jewish men was a radical break from their traditional day-to-day lives. As it was the public sphere where a successful man was supposed to compete in, being tied to the home translated into an imposed feminization and domestication of German-Jewish men. For Klemperer this increased isolation from the world was a depressing development and part of his emasculation. Yet, it was also partially voluntary. To circumvent the danger on the street, Klemperer decided to stay at home whenever possible. “I hardly get out of the house anymore. Always the fear of the dogcatchers.” “Eva must go out today; we are completely without food and I do not have the confidence to go into town.” And “I am completely tied and afraid of the street.” “Only when it is absolutely necessary do I venture on to the street.” Strikingly, the Nazis were successful in undermining (military) masculinity that orbited around values of individual courage and bravery. Klemperer saw himself emasculated through dread and fear. Only after some time did he decide to leave the house; even then, he consciously avoided busy streets and the city center. While Nazi propaganda praised the image
of the soldierly, steeled and risk-taking male, who stood his ground and shied away from no danger, military masculinity gradually dissolved for Jewish men. Docility and depression as well as physical deterioration were the possible consequences for Jewish men who had to live with the pervasive fear that the Nazi state cultivated. In 1942, Klemperer depicted some fellow Jewish men in Dresden the following way: “I went to see Aufrichtig. In the winter, a very strong, well-reserved animated man, now sitting in a leather armchair, apathetic, broken, [and] hollow-cheeked. … He was weak, not interested in anything, would repeatedly lie down on the bed and sleep.” Alluding to other men, Klemperer wrote: “Falkenheim has changed from a strong man into a shriveled little figure with a pale, very sunken face. Tall, broad-shouldered Cohn … has become a walking skeleton.”

Klemperer’s overt acknowledgement of fear reflects the changed status of his masculinity. The proud World War I participant had turned into an anxious man who was afraid of the street. Yet, Klemperer began to re-negotiate his perceived loss of manhood and found other ways to perform his masculinity. The very act of keeping a diary, for instance, was a courageous act under Hitler. Writing in a journal put Klemperer and his wife, as well as all individuals referred to in it, in acute danger. Without doubt, had the Gestapo discovered its whereabouts, investigation, imprisonment and torture would have resulted; and since the secret police frequently raided Judenhäuser, the danger was in fact very real. “This scribbling, this manuscript in the house is undoubtedly a constant risk in my life… And yet, I cannot stop writing.” While Klemperer had served in the German Army in the First World War, his heroic, courageous deed during the Third Reich was his continued risk-taking of keeping a diary. Another example of the negotiating process of his self-understood manhood occurred in his classroom when he was still teaching. Klemperer defied patterns of behavior that most Germans had quickly adapted to in 1933. In his diary, he reflected that he had never saluted with the Hitlergruß, a risk that could have easily resulted in an expedited loss of employment. And as late as August 1942, when he received some cigars from a friend, he smoked them even though “they are so very much forbidden.” In late 1941 Klemperer recalled, “I was sitting in a snack bar and saw the sign ‘No Jews allowed’ – not just the sign usual elsewhere: ‘Jews not welcome’. I remained nevertheless.” Consciously ignoring the ban, Klemperer decided to finish his lunch
and only then leave the restaurant. In the meantime, a police officer could have entered the establishment and asked for identification. In case of such an unlikely yet possible scenario, it is plausible to infer that Klemperer would have faced internment in a concentration camp, yet he defied the tangible danger and by that maintained a degree of independence and agency. In these and other situations of subtle yet meaningful courage and bravery, Klemperer did not shy away from the danger he knew he was in. As a man, who partially defined himself through his military service, he stood his ground.

2. Bourgeois Masculinity

Raffaella Sarti has argued that domesticity has for too long been analyzed as an exclusively female arena. Only recently have some historians gone back to ‘his-story’ from a new perspective, “studying men as men in the different arenas where they were acting, including the domestic.’ In addition to the emergence of a 19th century German military ethos that was closely linked to definitions of manhood and citizenship, a bourgeois (bürgerlich) understanding of manhood manifested itself that closely orbited around the home and the roles men played in it. Starting in the mid-1800s, a successful middle-class man was normatively expected to be in control of his own affairs and be a patriarchal guardian over the family that he was anticipated to build and protect. With an increasing division of separate spheres, the female sphere of influence had increasingly become the home, and taking charge of children and running the household constituted major responsibilities for middle-class Jewish women, while Jewish men acted as ardent participants in the emancipatory project of Germany Jewry, seeking to enter the public, secular world where they pursued socialization in the political and economic realms. Accordingly, a more gendered division between public (male/masculine) and private (female/feminine) spheres consolidated itself in 19th century European Jewish and non-Jewish life.

The concept of gender spheres is useful in this context as it provides us with a clear sense of how men and women typically organized their middle class lifestyles. With the coming of Jewish emancipation in the 19th century, German-Jewish men tried to enter the male-dominated public sphere of influence that was previously restricted to them. In Wilhelmine Germany, highly acculturated and bourgeois Jewish families generated gender-oriented expectations for
their sons, according to which they were to receive a prestigious, secular education and later pursue a socially respected profession. Klemperer’s family seems to be no exception. His family’s wish for him to move up the social ladder was realized with Klemperer’s achievement of a doctoral degree in 1913. For his role models, Klemperer followed his brothers’ footsteps who had become prominent lawyers and physicians. Attached to this success were masculine notions of status and respectability; with these in hand, Victor Klemperer was equipped to live a dignified life within German society.\(^{51}\)

In his attempt to maintain the role of a self-made man (in addition to his manifest belief in military masculine ideals), Klemperer revealed an explicit bourgeois masculine identity. Until 1933, the couple had lived in rented city apartments. In August 1933, Klemperer claimed that without building his first house, “I shall certainly be unable to pull Eva through this life for very much longer.”\(^{52}\) Not only was his duty to provide a secure home for his wife of paramount importance, but the symbolic act of building a house also constituted a signifier for manly behavior. A successful man and head of his household were expected to provide shelter, a home, in which their wife and children were safe and secure. Despite the fact that he was in a gradually deteriorating financial situation, due to the reduction and then final loss of his income, Klemperer nevertheless built a house for his wife. He kept his relentless feelings of concern and financial anxieties to a strict minimum in Eva’s presence and instead used his diary as a valve to release them: “I force myself to act as enthusiastically as if I believed in the building of the house, to shore up Eva’s mood.”\(^{53}\) The new house is testament to how Victor tried to maintain composure, suppress his fears in front of and around his wife and act as an achiever, a man in control who did not shy away from being the decision maker.

On numerous other occasions, the author noted that he had to control his emotions in Eva’s presence. “I have gradually become a master of suppressing all my worries.” Referring to his financial difficulties, Klemperer wondered in January 1935, “how to keep going with half an income? Impossible to discuss anything with Eva.”\(^{54}\) As a result of an increased secularization in most 19th-century Western European societies, femininity was increasingly associated with emotionality and religiosity, while bourgeois masculinity was translated into expectations for men to maintain composure and act rationally, even under dire circumstances.\(^{55}\) Klemperer’s
commentaries imply that matters of imminent concern could not always be discussed objectively and rationally with his wife, whom he did not wish to burden even more. Instead, Klemperer’s diary provides abundant evidence pertaining to how he feared for his wife’s mental state and physical health. He asserted that Eva had frequent and violent nervous breakdowns. In March of 1939, he lamented: “And so everything remains unchanged for us. Eva’s nerves in poor condition.” Clearly, as the supposed male guardian, he deemed control over his anxieties and fears as imperative for his wife’s well being. If he could act steadfastly and in a manly manner, not driven by fear, and thereby prove to be an example to his spouse, both could perhaps persevere under the Nazi onslaught. Building a house was part of this strategy and constituted a defining element of his gender performance and thus identity.

Further evidence of Klemperer’s performative guardianship and his concerns pertaining to his wife’s wellbeing is seen when Dresden was the target of the notorious February 1945 firestorm, and Klemperer was constantly worried about his wife, whom he got separated from in all the chaos and terror. It is almost quixotic how as a husband, Klemperer tried to fulfill his male role as protector during an air raid that he was completely helpless against and clearly not in control of. Even if Eva had stayed on his side during the bombing, Klemperer would likely not have been able to offer more protection and shelter to his wife. Yet in his retrospective reflections, his understanding of bourgeois manhood evidently included the supposed gender role of men taking physical and emotional care of their spouses. Being unable to always fulfill this gender norm, Klemperer was ridden by guilt and bad conscience.

Klemperer provides further indication of his bourgeois masculinity in his diary through his quasi stubborn adherence to his academic pursuits. As a language professor, Klemperer had achieved recognition, acknowledgment and status in society. As acculturated German Jews tried to realize more inclusion into German society in the 19th and 20th centuries, cultivated education (Bildung) was viewed as an effective tool towards this end. When Klemperer was fired from his teaching position at the university in 1935, he continued in his scholarly endeavors: he read voraciously, observed his environment and recorded his findings in written words, and even produced new scholarly articles and books. All are proof of how Klemperer continued to follow his calling for intellectual pursuits and thereby uphold the social status he had previously
obtained. As Monika Richarz argued, starting in the 19th century, Jewish men increasingly identified themselves through their work and the associated merits and achievements their vocations brought them. Klemperer wrote: “Now I want to make it a point of pride that despite everything, I make good use of my time and persevere with my studies.”

Both elements, pride and purpose, have strikingly gendered connotations. A bourgeois man was supposed to be an achiever, a self-made individual who entered the competitive world and returned a winner. Cut off from society and not even being allowed to borrow books any longer from the public library, Klemperer continued with his profession and calling. According to Michael Wildt, Klemperer’s clinging to his work helped him to overcome some of the hardships the Nazis had caused. In his lonely ‘self-world’ (Eigenwelt) as a literary expert, he was not a ‘nobody’, but a respected scholar. And it was in this world that he preferred to be. “I have proven to myself once again that I can still produce. And once again I solemnly swear to myself to continue working in the face of every challenge.” Even as a forced, unskilled laborer, he found some dignity and pride, despite his clumsiness operating some factory machinery. “Now for the last three weeks, I have been operating the simple no. 14 machine by myself. I produce document files for the army… 25,000 of superior paper are finished…How much ingenuity there is in a window envelope, such as banks use! The machine required for that, is literally a machine town.” Klemperer’s words reflect the societal expectation of male productivity outside the home; even though Klemperer suffered tremendously from physical hardship and exhaustion, his commitment to productive work needs to be seen in a gendered context.

Klemperer’s performance of bourgeois masculinity was never static but was adapted to the changing circumstances of the 1930’s and 1940’s. This could include the increase in helping out in the household and taking care of day-to-day chores. In an almost humorous way, Klemperer complained about the frequent cleaning of the dishes or peeling of potatoes. Cut off from society (and despite some temporary forced labor), Klemperer’s cosmos became the home, the traditional sphere of women, who, if not able to afford a cook or house cleaner, typically took care of running the home themselves. Bereft of a space in the public sphere, Klemperer took on a new gender role that required gradual adaptation. Male participation in domestic affairs
coincided with a discursive feminization by the Nationalist Socialist press. Among others, *Der Stürmer* and *Der Völkische Beobachter* aggressively depicted and disseminated images of Jewish men as unmanly. Klemperer, the houseman, fits into this context of gendered attacks on Jewish men and the concomitant changes in their daily lifestyles. On his wife’s birthday in July 1943, he confessed: “Eva’s birthday. I have no present for her. But in the morning I scrubbed the kitchen.” Yet, as Klemperer was not only a direct participant but also an observer of the changes in the Jewish community of Dresden, he perceived how other Jewish men adjusted to their new situations at home. He noted that some men started teaching their children at home as a way of fighting boredom. Educating children at a young age and particularly at home were traditional female activities that due to Nazi intrusion into everyday life also would undergo some profound change and acquire a new meaning for men.

Above all, bourgeois masculinity was most explicitly challenged by the fact that men were no longer able to provide for themselves and their dependents. The dire financial situation was the most palpable and immediate predicament German Jews faced in the 1930s, and starting in the 1940s, living in physically segregated *Judenhäuser* meant a total dependency on the state. Even before the war, food was rationed and other everyday items such as soap became increasingly sparse. Many previous male breadwinners experienced this material destitution as failure. Victor Klemperer, living in a mixed marriage, profited from his wife’s privileged access to food and other material everyday items. He wrote “all the counting and economizing is now on Eva’s shoulders. I don’t have a single pfennig on me anymore, have long… not even had a wallet.” This disruption in his role as the provider was further enhanced through the regular donations the Klemperers received, from friends and neighbors, who were able to spare some food ration cards and other items. And how embarrassing it was when Eva brought home used cigarette butts that still could provide some pleasures. Even more humiliating must have been the moment when Victor started wearing shirts and shoes from deceased fellow Jews in the community:

Frau Ziegler gave me a wonderful, almost new nightshirt belonging to her deceased husband…. It is quite usual now to accept such presents. … And to wear “inherited” secondhand things is now a general fate. How many of these heirlooms I am wearing now! A hat from John Neumann, a house jacket of the same origin, a pair of shoes from Paul Kreidl, socks from Ernst Kreidl and likewise
Herr Ziegler and trousers from unknown from the clothes store, three shirts from the same source, a shirt from the fallen Haeselbarth.\textsuperscript{68}

Klemperer came from an affluent, well-to-do bourgeois family, and it is hard to imagine how it must have felt to start wearing clothes from his former colleagues. Certainly, this experience was not male-specific, but the perceived humiliation of no longer being able to afford the basic necessities that the male breadwinners were supposed to do was quite idiosyncratic to Jewish men. On July 12, 1944, he noted: “Eva’s birthday today. My hands quite empty again. Not even a flower.”\textsuperscript{69} Such humiliations were coupled with the ever deteriorating economic situation of restrictions and food rations: “Tomorrow [Eva] will have to beg from Frau Fleischer.”\textsuperscript{70}

It is one of the curiosities in Klemperer’s diary that while the economic and social lives of thousands of German Jews turned ever more oppressive, from 1936 onwards, Klemperer invested considerable energy and space in his journal on his fetish for automobiles. Obtaining a motor vehicle was not only a privilege for the bourgeois upper class; it was also the realm of men who used cars to show off their wealth and alleged masculine superiority in mechanics and technology. After his discharge from the university, Klemperer overcame some initial reluctance and agreed to further financial burdens to fulfill his longstanding dream of purchasing a car. Klemperer’s car was a trophy he was proud of, and with which he developed an intimate relationship. Acquiring this trophy resembled a victory for a man whom the Nazis sought to emasculate. He proved himself to be in control of complicated technology and demonstrated skills that were thought to be possessed only by men. Driving a car was still men’s territory in 1930s Europe.\textsuperscript{71}

In early 1936, Klemperer’s everyday life started to orbit around driving lessons, a frightening process for the diarist at first. Yet, Klemperer achieved a personal victory that seemed to matter more to him than anything else. He stated with pride: “I passed the test yesterday morning. This business is really two things for me, a victory over my own nature, achieved with great difficulty and a matter of the utmost importance.”\textsuperscript{72} Empowered to drive a car meant an extension of agency and performance of independence. Being able to drive whenever and wherever, Klemperer reclaimed lost space and autonomy and used his car to physically and psychologically liberate Eva and himself. Frequent excursions and tours through
the countryside were supposed to return some quality of life. The chivalric, bourgeois Klemperer was overjoyed to drive his wife around and show her places of interest. Additionally, Klemperer’s acquisition of his beloved Opel car resulted in an additional financial burden that turned this endeavor into what he called a “desperado adventure.” Yet, it was the psychological victory that compensated for all risks. Even when the Klemperers’ finances turned more precarious and there was no longer money for gasoline, the car would not be sold. Even after the Nazis forbade Jews to drive in 1938, Klemperer did not sell his trophy at first. When he did three years later, he felt miserable. What is more, Klemperer never seemed to contemplate asking his “Aryan” wife – who was legally allowed to drive – to obtain a driver’s license. Driving a car in 1930s Europe was a man’s job.

Through gendered behaviors of defiance and courage, Klemperer tried to maintain an identity as a man. Although his masculine identity was challenged and at times feminized, exemplified by his increased presence in the kitchen, Klemperer was able to find and operate an effective (albeit temporary) mechanism of gendered self-control that he used to make his and his wife’s lives more tolerable. Klemperer’s gendered reactions to the Nazi regime illustrate how he re-configured his male identity by taking back some control over his and his wife’s life by preserving spatial mobility and freedom through making good use of their car and building a house.

**Conclusion**

Klemperer’s gender identity was rooted in the hegemonic model of masculinity that most Jewish and non-Jewish German men practiced, and Klemperer’s gender performativity as part of his gendered identity seems to have been largely influenced by the social practices and cultural manifestations of hegemonic masculinity. Klemperer’s masculine identity is evinced through his care for being the breadwinner of the household and his almost stubborn eagerness in his continued scholarly endeavors, which he used to maintain his social standing as a respected professor. At the same time, military masculinity remains a striking feature in his diaries. Even for a scholar who arguably had little in common with a militarist ethos, like the one the Nazis exhibited, Klemperer linked societal values and norms typically associated with the military – honor and camaraderie for instance - to normative German and German-Jewish manhood. He
identified himself as a German-Jewish man by referring to World War I on numerous occasions. Klemperer’s gendered performativity therefore illustrates how an ostracized man whom the Nazis hoped toemasculate, tried to defy this process of exclusion and remain – at least spiritually – in the social body of Germans that was governed and regulated, amongst other rules, by gender codes and expectations.  

Keeping a diary was of the utmost importance to Klemperer, not only in the disheartening years of the Third Reich. For Klemperer, keeping a diary offered him a welcome means to withdraw into an internal world that he used to make sense of and organize his thoughts pertaining to the outer world. The act of writing into his journal epitomizes a withdrawal from the public to the private sphere, or as Steven Aschheim argued, “public life and intimate chronicle became one.” Using the diary as a tool, Klemperer succeeded in transcending the exclusion of the outer world during the time of Hitler into a new space, in which he could think, write and express what he had in mind. Part of this diary-writing project was to continue to live with a sense of manhood, constructed through notions of bourgeois and military masculinity.

More than eighty years later, Klemperer’s diaries remain a fascinating and rich historical source. Despite the importance historians have assigned to the diaries since their publication in the 1990s, they are not an ‘institution of truth’ (Wahrheitsinstanz); instead, the diaries are texts that by definition contain a great deal of subjectivity. Informed readers can view Klemperer’s diaries as a text that allows us to look back into a past era, but that is not necessarily representative for all German Jews, particularly so as Klemperer – unlike most German Jews – benefited from his protected status of being married to an ‘Aryan’. As Kim Wünschmann in her study on prewar German-Jewish male concentration camp prisoners has shown, however, there is no way of putting all men into a single, representative body who shared a similar experience, and this article makes no general claims for constructing an all-encompassing universal picture of German-Jewish masculinities in the Third Reich. It is likely that Klemperer’s gender performativity during a time of crisis was shared by other Jewish men in similar situations and who originated from similar backgrounds (class, profession, age), but further research is required before larger conclusions can be made.
Above all, German Jews were attacked because of their Jewish identity and ancestry. But part of this process was the Nazi attempt to marginalize Jewish men and eliminate their sense of manhood. Victor Klemperer, one such man, proves how he struggled to maintain adherence to the hegemonic model of masculinity in mainstream German society. Klemperer’s diaries reflect how culturally embedded his ideas of manhood were: his sense of military and bourgeois masculinity mirrored definitions of normative gender roles that had evidently formed before 1933. These established gender norms and roles continued to be meaningful during the time of prolonged crisis in the Third Reich, despite under radically different circumstances. While more research is needed on this subject, this case study of the self-construction of a German-Jewish man hopefully constitutes a first step in gaining a more nuanced understanding of the gender-specific layers of the German-Jewish experience by men who, together with their loved ones, tried to subsist in the Third Reich.

**Bibliography**


Hödl, Klaus, *Die Pathologierung des jüdischen Körpers im Fin-de-Siecle*. (Vienna: Picus Verlag, 1997).


Endnotes

1 I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Christopher R. Friedrichs, my committee members Dr. Kyle Frackman and Dr. Richard Menkis as well as the anonymous readers of this journal for their valuable inputs, proofreading and other editorial contributions. A version of this essay was also presented at the Conference of the Western Jewish Studies Association Conference in Vancouver, May 2015.


3 Richard Evans, Michael Burleigh and Marion Kaplan (among others) made extensive use of Klemperer’s diaries. Saul Friedländer opens his Pulitzer-prize winning Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945 with a Klemperer quote. Historians on general German and European history, too, have integrated Klemperer’s diaries into their works.

4 Klemperer’s impressive life story is anything but ordinary. He converted to Protestantism in 1903 and did not identify with his Jewish origins of his family. In 1933, he was classified as Jewish as a result of Nazi racial legislation, however. Over the course of the Third Reich, Klemperer profited from living in a “mixed marriage” to a non-Jewish woman. His overall survival can most likely be contributed to this single factor alone as Jews living in mixed marriages were generally spared from or faced delayed deportation.

5 I chose military and bourgeois masculinity as I think both find frequent and striking expressions in his diaries. As a war veteran and as an upper, middle-class man, Klemperer’s gender construction in his diaries is strongly based on past experiences, his upbringing, as well as his current socio-economic situation that define his everyday life. Furthermore, military and bourgeois masculinity together constitute typical elements of the hegemonic model for Jewish and non-Jewish German men at this time. Other types of masculinity, such as working class masculinity, a masculinity based on bodily features such as muscles and expressions of strength and aggression (the warrior type), masculinity defined as the Loner, the Adventurer who explores and conquers the world on his own; masculinity defined as being a statesman of diplomacy and politics with a wider, public significance; or masculinity defined within the context of the nuclear family and being a father figure, are either not applicable or promise only limited results for this study.

6 Joan Ringelheim, “The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust,” Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual (Los Angeles: Simon Wiesenthal Center, 1984) and “Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of

7 Benjamin Maria Baader, Sharon Gillerman & Paul Lerner, eds. *Jewish Masculinities: German Jews, Gender and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 15. The genocide scholar Adam Jones also calls for a new understanding of gender and genocide. He argues that for most practical purposes of studying the Holocaust and genocide, “gender has been regarded as synonymous with women/femininity. Most studies have focused on women’s experiences of genocide and other catastrophes, with an emphasis on the female as victim.” See Adam Jones, “Gender and Genocide” in *The Historiography of Genocide*, ed. Dan Stone (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 228-252.


& Kirsten Heinesohn (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), 273. Deborah Herz, in her critique of Sander Gilman’s work and Daniel Boyarin’s *Unheroic Conduct*, also refers to the problem of constructing gender identity based on discursive studies of language and texts. Boyarin argues that in 19th-century Jewish religion, feminizing Jewish men was common, and in fact, celebrated by Jewish religious leaders such as rabbi Samuel Hirsch, and their writings. The effeminate image of Jewish men was linked to the traditional ideal image of Jewish men devoting themselves entirely to religious study. A respected Jewish men, in Boyarin’s view, was one of religious learning and teaching and who did not participate in the secular process of acquiring a military masculinity. This type of Jewish masculinity – that orbited around notions of domesticity and pacifism – found its spiritual strength in religion in order to endure antisemitism, and it thus accepted passivity of Jewish suffering. As Herz (and Kaplan) rightly point out, however, such intellectual histories and cultural studies that are based on the writings and speeches of leaders begs the important question of social experience and behavior. Examinations of primary documents like Klemperer’s diaries demonstrate that this idealization of the ernudite, religious Jewish male, who defied the military, became increasingly unpopular in 19th-century Western Europe and did not reflect common social attitudes and behaviors amongst the acculturating German Jews. See Deborah Hertz, “Männlichkeit und Melancholie im Berlin der Biedermeierzeit,” in *Deutsch-Jüdische Geschichte als Geschlechtergeschichte*, eds. Stefanie Schüller-Springorum & Kirsten Heinesohn (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), 286-290.


14 According to Peter Jacobs, it seems as if Klemperer simply wanted to gain control over his anxieties and prove to the world that he was not a coward. Raised with patriotic feelings as a German, he saw his duty for the country no longer distinguishable from that of a craftsman or worker. Jacobs, *Victor Klemperer*, 68.


24 According to Peter Jacobs, it seems as if Klemperer simply wanted to gain control over his anxieties and prove to the world that he was not a coward. Raised with patriotic feelings as a German, he saw his duty for the country no longer distinguishable from that of a craftsman or worker. Jacobs, *Victor Klemperer*, 68.


27 Victor Klemperer, *To the Bitter End: The Diaries of Victor Klemperer*, 1942-1945, trans. Martin Chalmers (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 61 & 79. Further remarks on World War I include: May 31, 1942: “I often tell myself that I was also in mortal danger in 1915. But here death threatens me in a more awful form.” August 1, 1942: “Tomorrow, outbreak of war in 1914... what a decent business the last war was, how little it horrified me in

It is important here to distinguish the Nazi use of the term heroism and Klemperer, the World War I veteran, and his definition. In Klemperer’s 1946 Lingua Tertii Imperii, the author compares the perverted use of heroism in Nazi Germany, when young men and women “who had barely mastered the alphabet” were “infatuated with the most dubious notion of heroism.” He ridicules the propagandistic efforts of military heroism that is “stored in every factory and in every cella. Children, women and old people die one and the same heroic death … For twelve years, the concept and vocabulary of heroism are increasingly and ever more exclusively restricted to military bravery and foolhardy, death-defying behavior in some military action.” In his words, “there is more to heroism than courage and putting your own life on the line. Any ruffian or criminal can summon up these qualities. The hero was originally someone who performed deeds which benefitted mankind. A war of conquest and especially one which perpetrated such atrocities as Hitler’s has nothing to do with heroism.” See Victor Klemperer, Lingua Tertii Imperii: The Language of the Third Reich, trans. Martin Brady (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2013), 2-7.


For more literature on German Jewry and the First World War see Paul Mendes-Flohr’s book chapter in German-Jewish History in Modern Times Vol. 3: Integration in Dispute 1871-1918, eds. Michael Meyer & Michael Brenner (New York: Columbia Press, 1999), as well as studies by Sabine Hank and Herbert Simon.


Klemperer, To the Bitter End: The Diaries of Victor Klemperer, 1942-1945, 51.

Ibid., 115.

Ibid., 348.


Ibid., 313.

Ibid., 26.


Klemperer, To the Bitter End: The Diaries of Victor Klemperer, 1942-1945, 100.

Ibid., 6, 8, 28 & 58.

The evidence the Klemperer diaries put forward seem to approve Marion Kaplan’s thesis of female Jewish activism and vigor in the Third Reich (trying to push for emigration, for instance), while many middle-class men increasingly turned passive and depressed. See Marion Kaplan, Between Dignity and Despair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Klemperer, To the Bitter End: The Diaries of Victor Klemperer, 1942-1945, 111-114.
For Klemperer’s masculine self there were few distractions to his creativity. Upon their move to Dresden, according to the diaries of Willy Cohn who in similar veins felt this urge to continue with his academic pursuits during the time of increa sing restrictions and intimidations. Willy Cohn, University Press, 2012.

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64 Klemperer, To the Bitter End: The Diaries of Victor Klemperer, 1942-1945, 227.
65 Ibid., 229.
67 Klemperer, To the Bitter End: The Diaries of Victor Klemperer, 1942-1945, 170.
68 Ibid., 160.
69 Ibid., 319. Klemperer expressed similar feelings of guilt on his 40th wedding anniversary. See page 315.
70 Ibid., 99.
71 See also Barabara Haubner, Nervenkitzel und Freizeitvergnügen: Automobilismus in Deutschland, 1886-1914 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998).
73 Jacobs, Victor Klemperer, 205.
74 Ibid., 148.