Soon after her arrival in the Ukrainian-Polish border town of Volodymyr-Volynsky in September 1941, 22-year-old secretary Johanna Altvater saw her boss shooting Jews who were loading barrels at the railroad station.

A year later, when she learned that Germans were expected to carry out the Final Solution “one hundred percent,” Altvater began to indulge her “nasty habit” of killing children. Sometimes she grabbed them by the legs, held them upside down, and slammed their heads against a wall. More often, she offered candy, and when a child opened his mouth, she shot him with a small silver pistol.

Altvater was unusually sadistic. But she was by no means the only woman to actively aid and abet the Nazis. In “Hitler’s Furies,” Wendy Lower, a professor of history at Claremont McKenna College, reminds us that the Nazis conditioned a generation of women, as well as men, to accept and commit violence. When the war ended, the women used gender stereotypes to deny they had done anything wrong.

Lower’s book adds to the consensus among historians that mass murder cannot be organized and carried out without “the broad participation of society.” Despite Hitler’s insistence that mothers were the heroines of Germany, and a myth that women tend to be apolitical, the Nazi state, Lower demonstrates, depended on a female workforce of secretaries, clerks, receptionists and nurses. When given “the opportunity” in these varied occupational settings, she writes, women made genocide “their business.”

Lower is hampered by a paucity of contemporary sources. She has had to rely on transcripts from a relatively small number of postwar war investigations and trials. Her book, therefore, tends to be anecdotal. And her characterizations of the motives and the sensibilities of her subjects are, at times, speculative. In Eastern Europe, she writes, “nearing the genocide was jarring for most women, since they were not formally trained in violence, either in committing it or responding to it.” In contrast, military training “prepared the young men to kill.” Did it prepare them, however, for mass murder and gas chambers? Is it possible that character and ideological commitment (rather than preparation) shaped the reactions of both men and women to the Holocaust?

In hindsight, it seems obvious that the massive, militarized Nazi state could not function effectively if half of its population was not helping run its government systems and private businesses. And yet, as Lower emphasizes, the role of women in administering the genocide, often “in some capacity just short of pulling the trigger,” has “been missing from our collective memory and official histories.” Until now.

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