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Gender & Germanness: (Kollektiv-)Biographien deutschnational-völkischer Frauen in der Habsburgermonarchie und in Österreich

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Ambivalent Position/ing/s: German-Nationalism, Auto/Biography, Gender

The present study deals with biographies of women in German-Nationalist societies in the Habsburg Monarchy and in Austria from the 1890ies to the 1960ies. According to the bourgeois gender model the German-Nationalist discourse in the outgoing 19th century positioned women in a seemingly non-political restricted ‘female sphere’. Even though female activists and sympathisers of völkisch politics took also an active part in constructing such gender meanings, actually the social space in which the women were acting was much more enlarged compared to the ideological concept. The German-Nationalist concept on gender identity gave (even though non-intended) an impetus to individual political socialisation of women. Central questions of the analysis are how women and girls individually dealt with the völkisch offer and order on gendered national identity, how they integrated the German-Nationalist ideology in their biographical constructions and howautobiographical narratives of female activists can be compared concerning discursive practises andstrategies and the function of self-positioning and self-integration.

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As a result of the analysis it can be mentioned, that the national imaginations on a restricted apparently 'non-political female sphere' produced in fact expanded spaces for political acting of women. In addition, the ambivalence of the German-Nationalist gender concept allowed female activists to negotiate own interpretations and to generate own models of acting within the German-Nationalist milieu. The present study shed light on quite powerful positions of women within the völkisch discourse as well as in the executive board of German-Nationalist societies or in their institutions. In many cases the German-Nationalist societies refused appreciation for those female activists who were involved lifelong in the societies' fields of activity. Male functionaries denied paying tribute to a women's work being considered as 'political activities', because a political exertion of women was incompatible with the propagated gender images. And even ego-documents of female activists too point out a fine line on which women paced with their discursive strategies of a non-political self-positioning on the one hand and the legitimisation of doing politics on the other. Being part of the German-Nationalist project guaranteed to the female activists the hegemony of the assisted bourgeois social structure and cultural model, and assured its proportion of power. By confirming the racist and anti-Semitic German-Nationalist ideology women participated in dominant political power positions that were (according to the bourgeois gender model) not really designated to them. Moreover by attending German-Nationalist politics female activists anticipated a social advancement or countered the fear of social descent. At the same time being part of the German-Nationalist power politics demanded defensive arguments and strategies of assertion of the female activists: most of the women rejected explicitly a political dimension in their doing. German-Nationalist discourse is clearly evident in autobiographical constructions of female activists: Here gender and nation work as authorities of homogenisation and standardisation in the process of constructing biographical identity. Female activists consistently related their life stories and individual

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experiences to German-Nationalist narratives. The narrations of the nation coagulate to 'personal experience' in autobiographical memories and biographical self descriptions. Women adapted biographical occasions to the German-Nationalist discourse and did fit their individual life stories into the highly gendered völkisch collective. The women's fields of activity as well as their self-inscriptions into the imagined community point out clearly the breakings within and the ambivalences of individual German-Nationalist gender identity.

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