

The Cruelty of Nazi Women: An Examination of the War-time Trials of Irma Grese and Ilse Koch

By Jackie Becker

When thinking about the evil perpetrated by Hitler and the Third Reich I often ruminate about the concentration camps and the tales of cruelty that occurred within their fences. I imagine Nazi guards roaming the camps searching for someone to punish, envision scenes from films such as *Schindler's List* or *The Pianist*, call to mind moving passages from Eli Wiesel's book *Night*, or even remember the solemn feeling that crept over me when I first visited the Holocaust museum in Washington D.C. However, none of these things prepared me for the knowledge that women sometimes played an active role in these atrocities. Two such women were Irma Grese and Ilse Koch. They were both charged and convicted of brutal crimes against humanity; one was sentenced to death and the other life in prison. These two were stationed within the camps and played active roles in the choosing whom was to be murdered in the gas chambers as well as countless other acts of brutality inflicted on the inmates of their camps.

The disturbing life stories of these women seem to be somewhat at odds with the Nazi vision of a woman's role in society. Hitler himself was quoted as saying: "Providence assigned to woman the cares of a world that is particularly her own, and it is only on this that man's world can be shaped and constructed. That is why these two worlds are never in conflict. They complement each other; they belong together, as man and woman belong together. We feel it is not appropriate when woman forces her way into man's world, into his territory; instead we perceive it as natural when these two worlds remain separate."¹ This quote illustrates Hitler's belief that a "Woman's World" should not overlap with a "Man's World." Logically, it seems that the actions carried out by Irma Grese and Ilse Koch belong firmly in the category of a "Man's World"; yet, Grese was recognized for her cruelty and was promoted to positions of authority because of it. Ilse Koch wasn't an *Aufseherin* [female Nazi guard], but instead was in the Camps as a guest of her husband when she carried out her heinous acts. The actions of these women do not coincide with Hitler's description of a woman's role in society and are arguably in direct conflict with it since both women were firmly living and acting

1. Adolf Hitler, "Speech to the National Socialist Women's Organization" from Felicia Morris, "Beautiful Monsters" Pg. 59

according to the confines of a "Man's World." In fact, many of the newspaper articles written at the time of the trials of these two women seek to demonize their actions and seem to present them as extra-heinous, simply because they were women.

Irma Grese was very young when she first came to the camps and unlike many of her fellow Aufseherin; she had chosen to be there. "Irma Grese first arrived at Ravensbrück in March of 1941; however, she was told to return in six months time when she would be eighteen and of the proper age to enlist for training. She waited over a year to return to the facility and when she did so, she volunteered for the auxiliary guard service. This presents an important and startling fact: Irma Grese chose to be an active service member and camp guard.² Perhaps the fact that Grese chose to become a member of the guard, to place herself in a position of ability to inflict such pain on others was a direct result of her upbringing since her father was a member of the Nazi party and her mother committed suicide when Grese, was only twelve years old.³ Yet, Grese herself told the world that her father, though he was a member of the Nazi party, greatly disapproved of her actions as an Aufseherin, when she tells of a visit home in which she told her father of her actions within the camps and according to her: "he gave me a beating and told me never to come home again."⁴ What reported crimes, you may ask, could be so bad that even a member of the Nazi party would look down upon them? Possibly, that according to a survivor, Grese was "the girl that made a kind of sport with us at Belsen... [She made us] fall down, get up, run, walk, trot – until exhausted"⁵ or that "she often beat people with her riding whip. When people were being loaded on trucks to be taken to the crematorium, Miss Grese would push them about and hit them with a stick."⁶ These were only a few of the charges made against Grese at the famous Belsen trial and they were not the worst.

Once captured, Grese maintained her composure and didn't waiver in her belief of the righteousness of her actions until close to the end of the trial when she said: "But I suppose I have as much guilt as all the others above me, ... I mean by this that simply by being in the SS and seeing crimes committed on orders from those in authority and doing nothing to protest and stop them ... makes anybody in the SS as guilty as anybody else. The crimes I refer

2. Morris, "Beautiful Monsters" Pg. 64

3. Morris, "Beautiful Monsters" Pg. 63

4. "Belsen Girl Guard Blames All Of SS" New York Times, Oct 06 1945.

5. "Sensation Slated For Belsen Trial" New York Times, Sep 30 1945.

6. "Belsen Tortures By Woman Listed" New York Times, Sep 27 1945.

to are gassing people at Oswiecim and the killing of thousands at Belsen by starvation and untended disease. I consider the crime to be murder."⁷ Notice in this statement that she made no mention of the fact that beating the people within the camps was a crime. This is perhaps why when she received her death sentence at the end of the trial that she lost all of her "famous" composure which was described as: "the iron calm of blonde, smartly dressed Irma Grese"⁸ and shouted out: "I never shot a prisoner. I never shot anyone."⁹ I guess that in her twisted mind her actions were not that bad because she didn't "shoot anyone." Beating people, torturing them, and sending them to gas chambers were all ok to Grese because after all she never "shot a prisoner."

Overall the crimes committed at the concentration camps were horrible atrocities. During the Belsen trial a member of the prosecution, Colonel Backhouse stated: "Every member of the Belsen gang bore a share in treatment they knew would cause death and physical suffering. We will produce evidence that they committed deliberate acts of cruelty and willful murder."¹⁰ He also told the court that Grese was "the worst of the women guards"¹¹ and apparently the court agreed with Colonel Backhouse because Irma Grese was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. Grese was only twenty-two years old when she was sentenced to death at the Gallows for her crimes. Only two other women were sentenced to death at the Belsen Trial and they were Elizabeth Volkenrath and Juana Borman, who was famous for setting her dogs on inmates and watching as they tore them apart. Grese is reported to have maintained her composure while her verdict and sentencing was read but: "Once outside the room Fraulein Grese, who had swaggered at the camp with a pistol strapped to her waist and a whip in her hand, broke into violent sobs."¹² She was the youngest Aufseherin to be put to death over her actions at the concentration camps.¹³

Ironically, Ilse Koch, who was not an Aufseherin, but was accused of crimes just as horrid, was not sentenced to death but rather life in prison. Convicted of: "one count of incitement to

7 "Belsen Girl Guard Blames All of SS"

8 "Belsen Woman Guard Weeps, Denies Guilt" *New York Times*, Oct 17 1945.

9 "Belsen Woman Guard Weeps, Denies Guilt"

10 "SS killed 4,000,000 at Oswiecim, Prosecutor Says at Kramer Trial" *New York Times*, Sep 18 1945.

11 "SS Killed 4,000,000..."

12 "Kramer and Irma Grese Will Die With 9 Others for Reich Murders" *New York Times*, Nov 18, 1945.

13 "Kramer and Irma Grese Will Die with 9 Others for Reich Murders"

murder, one of incitement to attempted murder, five of incitement to severe physical mistreatment of prisoners and two of physical mistreatment"¹⁴ her worst alleged crimes were never punished. Among these was the charge of having the tattooed skin of prisoners removed, treated, and made into lampshades and other household goods. One survivor wrote to *The New York Times*, referring to the existence of items made out of human skin, saying: "The finished products were turned over to SS Standartenfuehrer Koch's wife, who had them fashioned into lampshades and other ornamental household articles."¹⁵ While this accused crime was never able to be sufficiently proven in court, it was mentioned in a statement made as a response to the public outcry which resulted from Koch's escape of the hangman: "The court found no proof that anyone at Buchenwald had been murdered for his tattooed skin, but it expressed no doubt that skin lampshades had been made and that human heads had been shriveled and preserved at the camp."¹⁶ The controversy circling the Koch's 4-year American sentence and subsequent German life sentence was very strong. People were outraged that "the beast of Buchenwald"¹⁷ was able to escape a death sentence when many of her crimes were considerably worse than some of her fellow female war criminals.

The nickname, "the Beast of Buchenwald" was one among many demeaning ways in which people referred to Ilse Koch. In the courtroom, her Judge called her a: "ruthless and hard-headed woman [who] had been aware of beatings, whippings, and hangings of prisoners" and that she "had done everything in her power to worsen the condition of those poor tortured men."¹⁸ This description of Koch by the German Judge can be compared to that of an American prosecutor who said that she possessed: "unparalleled sadistic perversity."¹⁹ These claims are joined by accusations of bestiality, nymphomania, and sadism.²⁰ All of these things culminate with the effect of showing the world that Ilse Koch was, "one of the most notorious Nazi war criminal who escaped the hangings."²¹ Even as the wife of an SS member, it was unusual that Koch was allowed to roam so freely through the camps and was reportedly one of the only wives to do so. It is

14 "Germans Give Ilse Koch Life Term For Crimes Against Countrymen" *New York Times*, Jan 16 1951.

15 "Evidence Cited in Ilse Koch Case" *New York Times*, Nov 6 1948.

16 "Germans Give Ilse Koch Life Term For Crimes Against Countrymen"

17 "Ilse Koch Hangs Herself in Cell" *New York Times*, Sep 3, 1967.

18 "Germans Give Ilse Koch Life Term For Crimes Against Countrymen"

19 "Ilse Koch Hangs Herself in Cell"

20 "Ilse Koch Hangs Herself in Cell"

21 "Ilse Koch Hangs Herself in Cell"

widely suggested that she chose to partake in the events within the confines of Buchenwald because the atrocities there fed her sadistic nature. She was accused of: "Beating with a riding crop prisoners she encountered during morning rides through the camp, ordering others beaten and killed and requiring prisoners to participate in orgies involving sadism and degeneracy."²² The ordering of orgies was also later paired with the fact that she produced an illegitimate son, while in prison, as proof of her supposed nymphomania.²³

Both Koch and her husband were accused of witchery being at the source of their rise to power. It was said that SS Koch married her in a "spectacular pagan night ceremony outdoors in 1937."²⁴ The pagan aspect of their lifestyle left many wondering why it was that Hitler was supposedly so close to the Koch family and why Hitler would place SS Koch in charge of Buchenwald over many much more qualified men. Another allusion to witchery on the part of Mrs. Koch is that she possessed an "unnatural control over her husband."²⁵ These superstitious claims were all made after her husband was found guilty of crimes against the Nazi party but pardoned by Hitler, until close to the end of the war when he was shot for his crimes.²⁶ Interestingly enough, these claims against the Koch family were widely rumored and vaguely mentioned here and there but were never explicitly levied against Mrs. Koch.

One crime that was levied against Mrs. Koch both in press and the courthouse were the allegations that she was a horribly abusive, neglectful mother. I found this claim interesting because on the surface it has absolutely no relationship to her status as a Nazi war criminal. However, after looking closer, the connection became clearer. It was Koch's sadistic and narcissistic dispositions that allowed her to participate so enthusiastically in the atrocities of the camps and because she was so actively involved in the goings-on of the camps she by default a "bad" mother guilty of neglect and abuse. It is reported that the Koch family lived in a mansion near the camps yet the children grew up in "abject poverty."²⁷ Almost all the articles that mention her illegitimate son also mention the fact that the boy was raised in an orphanage as though this too was the fault of Mrs. Koch. These two facts were very interesting because in almost all circumstances the articles hint that it is the fault of Koch implicitly that her children were not

22 "Ilse Koch Hangs Herself in Cell"

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24 "Ilse Koch Hangs Herself in Cell"

25 "Germans Give Ilse Koch Life Term For Crimes Against Countrymen"

26 "Germans Give Ilse Koch Life Term For Crimes Against Countrymen"

27 "Ilse Koch Hangs Herself in Cell"

well taken care of. Yet, all of these reports neglect to mention that many were living in "abject poverty" because after all this was occurring during wartime when resources were scarce. Also, her illegitimate child had to be raised in foster care because she was incarcerated for life at the time of his birth. These slanders against Koch in the press were undoubtedly a way of further vilifying her actions. Unlike Grese, Koch could not claim that her actions were a part of her job and therefore she was only guilty of following orders, she had to be personally held accountable because her participation was a choice and I believe that this is one reason why the reports about Mrs. Koch are so much more aggressive than the claims made against Grese.

Physically, Ilse Koch was described as a: "plump woman with vivid green eyes and flaming red hair"²⁸ which was interestingly contrasted to the appearance of Irma Grese who was described as pretty and blonde. Both of these women were accused of horrid crimes against humanity, yet, in both the courtroom and the press, the words were much harsher against Koch than Grese. It seems plausible that one reason for this is that it was easier to paint Koch as a monster because she looked the part much more than Grese. Another possibility for the venom directed towards Koch could be that in both her trials she managed to escape a death sentence when so many of her fellow perpetrators didn't and her crimes were definitely comparable, if not worse.

Overall, I think that the cases of these two women provide interesting insight into one of the roles that women occupied within the Nazi regime. These women were to be both feared and respected and the penalty for not doing so was death. They viewed their prisoners as less than human, which is apparent from their behavior towards them. They were clearly not what Hitler envisioned the perfect Wife/Mother to be in his ideal society, yet, there was a place for them within the Nazi world. The differences in the descriptions of the two women, I feel, boils down to the fact that one was an Aufseherin, and therefore her crimes were enough to convict her, and the other was a wife and mother and therefore had to be vilified on a larger scale to show that her actions had no justification. I say this because comparatively the crimes of Irma Grese and Ilse Koch were very similar, the witness testimonies also strikingly equal in their cruelty, the nicknames "the Bitch of Auschwitz"(Grese) and "the Beast of Buchenwald" (Koch) very much alike, yet in the press Grese is always addressed as "Blonde", "pretty", and "calm." Her crimes are still described as heinous but her personality was generally left alone, her crimes were

28 "Ilse Koch Hangs Herself in Cell"

committed because it was her job. On the other hand every article I read explicitly attacks Ilse Koch, painting the picture that she was an EVIL woman and that is why she committed such heinous crimes. Overall, both ended up hanging for their crimes, Grese at the hand of the hangman, and Koch by her own hand when she became unable to cope with life imprisonment. Both of these women suffered deserved fates and while the actions of both were unquestionably cruel, I find it interesting that Koch was demonized much more emphatically than Grese. It makes sense, however, when you compare Koch's actions with her role in the "Ideal Nazi Society" because her actions did not in any way coincide with the actions expected of a mother/wife, whereas Grese was acting in accordance with her role as an Aufseherin.

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