

# **CULTURES OF ABORTION IN WEIMAR GERMANY**

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# CULTURES OF ABORTION IN WEIMAR GERMANY

Cornelie Usborne



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## PREFACE

Abortion has been legalized in many Western countries in the last three decades or so and yet it remains controversial and a subject which is never far away from the news.<sup>1</sup> In March 2006 the American state of Dakota passed the most sweeping ban on abortion in more than thirty years and provoked what one newspaper report called an ‘epic confrontation’ by ‘activists on either side of the abortion divide – the great faultline of American politics’.<sup>2</sup> Hardly a year goes by without a private member’s bill in the British parliament to reverse the liberal abortion law reform of 1967.<sup>3</sup> As I write, a referendum has been won in Portugal on a proposal for abortion on demand which would end ‘one of Europe’s harshest abortion laws’.<sup>4</sup> In May 1991 the disagreements over the abortion law threatened to split the German coalition government and in January 1998 German Catholic theologians called for a campaign of disobedience against a papal edict on abortion counselling.<sup>5</sup> The new German Pope Benedict continues to wrestle with the dilemma.<sup>6</sup> Abortion remains newsworthy because women of all classes, creeds and ethnicity continue to terminate their unwanted pregnancies in spite of laws criminalizing abortion and religious dogma condemning it, just as they have always done. It reveals women’s agency in exercising control over their lives and destinies, which is why abortion remains controversial to this day in societies that are still essentially patriarchal. In Weimar Germany abortion was practised not just as a back-up to other contraceptive methods but often as the first choice of family limitation; in the great majority of cases women were able to terminate unwanted pregnancies successfully and without harm to themselves. What is more, hundreds of thousands did so and influenced the law, public policies and official attitudes to women’s social role.

I originally set out, many years ago for my doctoral thesis, to study women’s reproductive behaviour in Weimar Germany; as my archival research progressed, however, and I found file after bulging file containing evidence of abortion reform campaigns and the reaction to this in official circles, another story began to emerge, more amenable to historical study. This was the evolution from an anti-abortion society to one in which it was increasingly condoned. At the beginning of the Weimar Republic abortions rose sharply but were officially condemned and heavily penalized; during the Depression it was estimated that the abortion rate exceeded the birth rate and the authorities of state, law and even the Protestant – though not the Roman Catholic Church – were increasingly accommodating the changing demographic behaviour. The result of this research was my monograph, *Politics of the Body in Weimar*

*Germany: Women's Reproductive Rights and Duties* (1992) which provides the sociopolitical context for this book. It explores how abortion features in popular culture but focuses mainly on women: how abortion affected their relations with husbands or lovers and how they experienced it, whether it was performed by family members or friends, professional abortionists or doctors.

Court records proved an invaluable source for my investigation but there were some anxious moments when it looked as if the German law on personal data protection would bar me from studying them. I was familiar with and had respected this law in my previous publications; but so worried were some archivists about letting me loose on what they regarded as delicate and compromising personal data that only protracted negotiations secured my access. Photocopies of records would have to be made anonymous by blanking out all proper names. I argued that this made it impossible to establish sexual, family and work relationships, understand their material circumstances or indeed recognize when individuals were accused a second or third time of criminal abortion. In one instance I was told to swear on the Bible to uphold the law and protect the secrets of my historical subjects. I accepted – but not before securing a better site than outside the gents' lavatories for this ceremony. The table with the Bible was moved, my oath was sworn and access was granted to what turned out to be very rich material indeed. In deference to the data protection law all proper names of suspects, accused or defendants in criminal abortion trials have been changed in this book but care has been taken to choose new names with an appropriate regional flavour. Only personalities well known at the time have retained their real names, either because they were familiar to the public from their political or professional role or because they gained notoriety through their involvement in a sensational court case which was covered extensively in the contemporary press.

Registered medical practitioners attempted to gain a professional monopoly by marginalizing or even outlawing lay practitioners whom they called 'quacks'. In the interest of legibility the words quacks or quackery will be used without quotation marks, which does not, however, indicate that I share contemporary doctors' prejudices against their competitors in the medical market.

During its long gestation, the embryonic project has been nourished by the support and advice of many colleagues and friends: different parts of my research were discussed in London by the Modern German History Seminar and the Women's History Seminar (both at the Institute of Historical Research), the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine and the History Workshop Seminar; in History seminars at the universities of Cambridge, Manchester, Roehampton, Southampton, Surrey and Sussex; in Germany at the universities of Hanover and Magdeburg; and at conferences in Britain, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands and the U.S.A. I am grateful for the many valuable comments I received. There is not the space to thank everyone by name or convey the extent of my indebtedness but I owe a special debt to Lynn Abrams,

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Last but not least I owe a debt of gratitude to the many (now anonymous) women I found in the archives and on whose stories I base much of my book. I have come to admire their strength of character in the face of adversity and their determination to fight their corner in the male-dominated world of law and medicine.

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