

SINGLE WOMEN IN IMPERIAL GERMANY



*T*he first issue of the magazine *Die Frau* (*The Woman*) announced its purpose in October 1893 with an ambitious subtitle: “A monthly journal for the complete life of women in our time.”¹ The lead article by editor Helene Lange described the term ‘woman’ as bringing forth “an abundance of pictures and thoughts ... the poetry of the domestic hearth, the creative and protective mother, the faithful nurse and educator ... pictures of completely carefree grace.”² Only women of privileged classes had ever been so carefree. But Lange declared that in the past few decades, such cozy images had been disrupted when “a callous hand brushed across the domestic hearth and directed millions of women out into the world.”³ The “callous hand” extended from the arm of industrialization. Lange contended that industry had displaced millions of middle-class females from their roles as domestic helpmates in the homes of parents, married brothers, and wealthier families seeking governesses or household managers. These forced outcasts comprised the *Frauenüberschuß*, or surplus of women. In her overture to the women of the modern age, Lange decried the “bitter peril” and “spiritual distress” that confronted the unwed bourgeois women of the German empire.

But *Die Frau*, along with the broader German women’s movement, did not intend to leave these women in such a dire predicament. Together, the publications, organizations, and leadership of the women’s movement would bring about “a new time ... in which the woman ... would stand before great challenges, her horizons would expand, her view would deepen; when powers which had so far slumbered would uniquely have to unfold.”⁴ Out of the ‘bitter peril’ of the unmarried, strong and dynamic females would emerge. Compelled by the *Frauenüberschuß*, the German women’s movement crafted its mission.

¹The Surplus Woman: Unmarried in Imperial Germany, 1871-1918” by Catherine L. Dollard is available open access under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license. This edition is supported by Knowledge Unlatched. OA ISBN 978-1-78533-662-1. Not for resale.

Eleven years after *Die Frau* began publication, women's rights advocate Elisabeth Gnauck-Kühne published a volume of fairy tales "for the young and old."⁵ Gnauck-Kühne's foray into fantasy was unusual for an author who spent most of her career engaged in demographic and social analyses. She intended to evoke in these stories the traumas of the modern age, especially those affecting women. One stirring tale, "*Die Nachtigall*," depicted the life of a nightingale who lived in a lush green valley. The splendor of the land inspired the nightingale:

"When I see such beauty my heart swells with air in my breast and I have to sing" ... Joyously and devoutly, the song sounded through the quiet evening air, so that the frogs in the pond stopped croaking, the gnats stopped dancing, and over in the farmyard the young farmer in shirtsleeves ... took the pipe out of his mouth and called through the open window into the gloomy room: "Listen, listen, the nightingale is singing." And those returning through the valley ... stood as if transfixed and put their finger to their mouths, held their breath, and waved to stragglers to be quiet: "The nightingale is singing! Listen, listen, the nightingale is singing!"⁶

The nightingale lived quite happily—until one day a frog disparaged her song. The frog accused the nightingale of fraudulence, arguing that the bird's joyful noise misrepresented reality: "You are alone. Even the gnats are swarmed together, and my kind also answers me—just listen." And sure enough, a chorus of croaks responded to the call of the nightingale's antagonist. The frog offered advice: "Think of the future, seek a companion, build a stable nest and make yourself useful. Then you will have reason to sing."⁷

The bird brooded and soon became overcome with sadness at her isolation:

The nightingale began to sing again, but softer and with a deeper tone and the song sounded like a question: Why, why am I alone? And she thought about who might answer her if she called out. The thought never left her ... Then a hot pain seized the nightingale. "Wherever I look, I see couples," she sobbed softly. "Only I am forsaken." And she felt a longing as if her pounding heart would break, and it would have broken in pain if she did not sing. But she sang; she sang as never before. The song welled up mightily ... it sounded tender and sweet as a harp ... In this way the nightingale lightened her heart and consoled herself, until she thought, "Even if I am alone, I am rich in my pain, for I have my song, my song!"⁸

Companionship soon alleviated her despair: "One evening ... a hesitating, twittering sound answered her. The nightingale trembled, she did not know why and did not want to believe her ears. But the tone resounded louder and louder and the guest flew nearer and nearer until he was sitting right next to her: yes, her companion was there!" The nightingale and her partner built a nest together and "her longing was filled, her pain quieted. She was no longer alone."⁹

After some time had passed, the frog was awakened in the midst of a sunny day's nap by a sudden movement in the trees:

Was he seeing right? Yes, really and truly, a bird flew over the water directly toward the old willow: it was the nightingale! "Hello! Hello, dear nightingale!" the frog called out happily

... But after he had observed her for a little while, he added uncertainly: "You are looking around so restlessly, is something wrong? Can I get you a fly or something?"

"No, oh no," whispered the nightingale, "I thank you, but I have everything I would wish: I am full, I am full."

"But you look around so strangely, as if lost ... are you looking for something?"

Then the nightingale gave a loud sob. "I have lost my song. I seek my pain and my song—my song."¹⁰

Elisabeth Gnauck-Kühne's nightingale grapples with the contradictory chords of her natural calling amidst the censure of bystanders. The bird at first thrived in her solitude, never considering it to be isolation. Solo and unburdened, she fulfilled her natural calling by offering to the world her gift of song. But once faced with outside judgment, she began to question herself and to envy all around her. Only song brought solace; her music became a vessel to fill a life judged as empty. Indeed, her gift to the community became ever more beautiful and stirring, as her *Lied* (song) was enriched by her *Leid* (pain). The pain lingered on until it ultimately was soothed by the companionship of a mate. The nightingale created a home and dedicated herself to a new life—but at great cost. In assuaging the pain wrought by isolation, the song of the nightingale had forever been quieted.

Gnauck-Kühne considered this fairy tale to be an allegory of the experience of single women at the turn of the century.¹¹ Like the nightingale, unattached women had unique contributions to offer society. But in attempting to share their talents, they invariably faced criticism and rebuke. Just as the frog derided the bird's song, single women also confronted charges of uselessness. Yet mockery and ridicule could become a source of empowerment for *alleinstehende Frauen* (women standing alone),¹² just as suffering enhanced the splendor of the nightingale's call. The very particular nature of an unmarried woman's loneliness had the potential to infuse society with beauty and generosity. When Gnauck-Kühne's protagonist mates, readers are meant to lament the loss of the nightingale's singular song. Gnauck-Kühne hoped that the tale would also compel its audience to hear and respond to the gifts of those solitary nightingales whose *Leid* might never be quelled by a mate, yet who nonetheless ever attempted to transform the world through their *Lied*.

The History of European Single Women

Life without marriage: anxiety about such a fate plagued many middle-class German women at the turn of the century. The notion of a demographic crisis called the *Frauenüberschuß* fueled discussion of women's rights in Imperial Germany. Both contemporary observers and historians have described the German *Frauenfrage* (woman question) as a *Ledigenfrage* (singles' question) and the *Frauenbewegung* (women's movement) as a *Jungfrauenbewegung* (movement of

virgins, connoting old maids).¹³ The distaff surfeit served as both discourse and demographic concern in considerations of the female role in society and culture. Helene Lange's description of the disrupted domestic hearth and Elisabeth Gnauck-Kühne's fantasy of the solitary life are both representative of a central theme of the debate regarding German women's rights. Recounted in speeches, petitions, newspaper articles, prescriptive literature, demographic studies, fiction, journals of sexual science, attacks against the women's movement as well as apologia in favor of it, and even in fairy tales, the plight of the single woman informed and formed discussion of German women in the *Kaiserreich* (Imperial Germany).

The importance of the female surplus in Germany is made clear in the 1902 *Handbook of the Women's Movement*.¹⁴ Edited by Helene Lange and her companion, Gertrud Bäumer, the work asserted that one of the primary causes of the German woman question was "the numerical ratio of the sexes ... A tremendous surplus of women developed in the cities of the Middle Ages. Not to such an extent, but nevertheless also perceptibly, the same unfortunate condition exists in the nineteenth century ... It has further intensified in the course of the nineteenth century due to emigrations ... but also from the greater mortality [of men]."¹⁵ While the description relies upon vague demographic assertions, it is firm in its contention that a perceptible increase in the majority of females plagued the late nineteenth century. A 1911 encyclopedic entry on the *Frauenfrage* further described the displaced female: "the number of unmarried women is increasing ... They must create an existence. The oft-repeated saying: 'the woman belongs in the house' is a foolish and empty cliché as long as each woman cannot be given a husband and a home."¹⁶ The notion of a surplus of unmarried women was a central pillar of debates surrounding the changing nature of society throughout the *Kaiserreich*.

This book investigates the ways in which anxiety about too many single women served as a leitmotif in the German culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By identifying single women as the focus of study, this work fits into a growing body of historical scholarship.¹⁷ The interest in marital status as a subject of historical investigation has increased alongside the development of the field of women's history. Marital status provides both a social category and a descriptive arena by which female experiences can be examined. As Judith Bennett and Amy Froide have noted in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250–1800*, "the histories of European women, European families, and European societies look very different when single women are a part of the story."¹⁸ The essays edited by Bennett and Froide identify class, age, sexuality, religion, and region as key factors that differentiate the experiences of single women of the pre-modern era.¹⁹ But even among widely disparate circumstances, Bennett and Froide note important similarities among single women, both positively in regard to single women's ability "to use their meager resources—cash, goods, credit, property—with fewer restrictions" than married women, as well as negatively in that unwed women were more vulnerable to persecution and ridicule because of

their “unprotected” status.²⁰ Still, the prospect of marriage itself served to connect both single and wedded women, as did stringent limitations on autonomy based upon sex rather than marital status.

Books by Martha Vicinus, Elaine Showalter, Rita Kranidis, and Mary Louise Roberts have examined the distinct experiences of unwed women in modern Europe. These works portray the modern unmarried woman as playing an important role in reconfiguring understandings of gender. By identifying single women as a cohort meriting scholarly consideration, these authors show how the female unwed posed distinct challenges to established gender norms, either directly through calls for political and social reform or indirectly as a result of cultural anxieties about the unattached female as a threat to social order.

Martha Vicinus’ *Independent Women* identifies the advent of the nineteenth century as a turning point in the lives of single women in that “for the first time in history a small group of middle-class women could afford to live, however poorly, on their own earnings outside heterosexual domesticity or church governance.”²¹ Vicinus’ study identifies a “unity of purpose” among independent women seeking to reconstitute constructions of femininity in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. The present study of the German surplus woman is a scholarly descendant of Vicinus’ work in its topical orientation, but it does not share her emphasis on residential institutions as a central theme.²² This book instead examines the cultural construction of the single woman as both object and creator of social reform—and thus, as a destabilizing force in turn-of-the-century gender norms.

In interpreting the discourse surrounding surplus women as a signifier of conflicting attitudes about changing gender roles, *The Surplus Woman* thematically echoes Elaine Showalter’s *Sexual Anarchy*, a work which examined “the myths, metaphors, and images of sexual crises and apocalypse that marked both the late nineteenth century and our own *fin-de-Siècle*, and its representations in English and American literature, art, and film.”²³ My work shares Showalter’s view that “odd women” served as a source of sexual anarchy in turn-of-the-century European culture.²⁴ Showalter treats single women as one component of a broad range of symptoms indicative of apocalyptic anxiety.

In *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration*, Rita Kranidis also offers an integrated reading of literature and history. Employing a perspective derived from postcolonial literary criticism, Kranidis traces the history of British female colonial emigration while arguing that “the colonial emigration of spinsters is analogous to the displacement and dispossession of the poor.”²⁵ Kranidis is particularly interested in teasing out the “cultural value” of the bourgeois female unwed: “If the middle-class Victorian woman’s value was seen to lie in her perfect domestication, and if the unmarried working-class woman’s value in her sexuality, then the middle-class emigrant spinster emerges as a hybrid: Where might *her* value reside?”²⁶ She answers that question by “conceptualizing the emigrant female as an already commodified cultural subject.”²⁷ Identifying middle-class spinsters in exile as commodities provides Kranidis with a way of linking the

histories of colonialism, class, capitalism, and the woman question. Yet it is precisely this theoretical description of the commodification of unwed women that precludes a more evidence-rich reading of the lives of real single women.

Mary Louise Roberts' books, *Civilization without Sexes* and *Disruptive Acts*, provide the most comprehensive look at the experience and representation of single women in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century France. *Civilization without Sexes* identifies three female icons (the modern woman, the mother, and the single woman) that dominated the postwar discourse surrounding gender. Roberts argues that the unwed woman occupied unique rhetorical space in the decade following the Great War: "the single woman became a focus of debate because she symbolized shifts in the social organization of gender."²⁸ Unmarried women simultaneously stood as pathetic objects of scorn, subjects of political debate, and figures that presaged a new age.²⁹ *Disruptive Acts* investigates the nature of female performances in the venues of Third Republic theatre and journalism. Roberts portrays women who "simply and often unwittingly [were] trying to think themselves out of the corners into which they had been painted."³⁰ In recognizing the confining nature of those corners, these women—in dangerous ways—reasserted the resonance of the labels (old maids, whores, shrews, viragos) that they had been trying to escape, even as they forced public reappraisal of both womanhood and singleness.³¹ My work has been influenced by Roberts' interpretation of the discourse surrounding unmarried woman as a signifier of cultural anxiety.

Yet Imperial Germany provides a significantly different context for the study of single women. After a series of victories in Prussian-led wars, German national unification in 1871 initiated an era in which the elusive goal of national cohesion was pursued and in which debates about the contours of German national identity were widespread.³² The *Kaiserreich* occupied an age of extraordinary economic and demographic growth. *The Surplus Woman* provides the first sustained examination of the ways in which Germans conceptualized anxiety about marital status as both a product and a reflection of changing times. Unmarried women served as potent threats to social order during this time of change; thus, appropriations of the *Frauenüberschuß* were contested by women's rights advocates and their opponents.

The surplus woman debate was uniquely German. Certainly, debates about the role of bourgeois single women took place in other national settings. But the politics, laws, and culture of the *Kaiserreich* provided an exceptional context for interest in and engagement with the contours of female marital status. First, suffrage played a less consequential role in the German women's movement than it did elsewhere. Universal male suffrage existed only in the national elections of Imperial Germany; most German states (including Prussia, the largest and most dominant federation) featured voting systems based upon property and wealth. Moreover, until 1908, German women could neither join political parties nor attend political gatherings. Given these restrictions, female suffrage was viewed by many German activists as a proposition that was simply out of reach. The politi-

cal crucible in which the German women's movement was formed dictated a reformist path emphasizing paths of reform beyond the vote, including education and vocation. Second, the laws of the individual states of the German empire by and large prohibited married women from working in professional fields such as education, law, medicine, journalism, and engineering. Because married women were excluded from white-collar professional life, discussion about bourgeois female work necessarily centered upon single women.

Finally, the culture of Imperial Germany featured spheres of intellectual engagement that enhanced interest in single women. The realms of sexology and social science, both fields of *Wissenschaft* (knowledge) that underwent significant development during the German *Kaiserreich*, provided fertile scholarly ground from which to examine female marital status.³³ Psychologists, anthropologists, and physicians interested in sexuality discovered a pathology of aberrance in the unwed—and presumably unsexed—female. While central European sexologists lamented the atrophying old maid, demographers explored her social underpinnings. New developments in population analysis, accompanied by eugenically fueled anxiety about decreasing birth rates, informed the German understanding of the surplus woman problem.³⁴ Though these statistical studies tended to overemphasize current conditions and did not examine thoroughly the change over time, they still lent an air of empirical credibility to discussions of the *Frauenüberschuß*. In this way, *Kaiserreich* fascination with the distaff unwed foreshadowed the twentieth-century postwar Germanies, in which demographic inequities fueled discussion of abundant women as a “problem.”³⁵

The postwar demographic surfeits of unmarried women had no parallel in Imperial Germany. As chapter 3 elucidates, the German *Kaiserreich* experienced no significant change in marriage rates or in terms of the unmarried proportion of the female population. This book provides the history of an assumption—and it shows that the assumption was a mistaken one. Yet the nonexistence of an intensifying demographic surfeit of unwed women makes the discourse surrounding the *Frauenüberschuß* all the more important to understand. In the French context, Roberts has observed that “regardless of whether these anxieties were ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ ... they did preoccupy, worry, and even traumatize French men and women. For this reason, they are cultural realities in themselves and warrant our closest attention.”³⁶ This project similarly asserts that despite the lack of clear demographic evidence of a female surfeit—in fact, *because* of such a lack—it is essential to understand the ways in which the surplus woman became an important emblem of change in German culture. The facts of population did not create the interest in single women. Assessments of the plight of the unwed instead emerged as a consequence of the tensions and uncertainties that characterized an era of great social transformation.

Unlike her counterpart in France and Britain, the German single woman of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries has not been the independent focus of historical analysis. This void is especially curious since the female majority is often cited in both contemporary and secondary discussions of the era.

Some historians of German women have considered the *Frauenüberschuß* as a peripheral concern or as background material; others have ignored it completely. Richard Evans' *The Feminist Movement in Germany, 1894–1933*, the first major English-language work on the early German women's movement, did not address the female surplus at all.³⁷ While Evans recognized the emphasis placed by women's rights advocates on opportunities for middle-class single women, he did not relate those reform activities to demography or to concerns about an excess of females.

Of those historical works that have addressed the German female surplus in the *Kaiserreich*, three sorts of assessments have emerged. The first model is found in the work of German historian Ute Frevert, who regards the female surplus as a simple consequence of change. She suggests that marital status played a role in the discussion of the 'woman question' due to a greater number of women exhibiting a "willingness to take fate into their own hands."³⁸ Frevert argues that there is little connection between the woman question and the *Frauenüberschuß* because the eighteenth century demonstrated similar demographic conditions without creating debate about women's roles in the greater society. But Frevert does not explore the peculiar emphasis on the female surplus in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nor does she detail the demographic analysis behind her assertions.

The second type of historical assessment of the female surplus concludes that the *Frauenüberschuß* is interesting but ultimately inconsequential. The works of Herrad-Ulrike Bussemer and Amy Hackett fall into this category. After looking at aggregate marriage rates, Bussemer maintains that no perceptible change occurs in the nineteenth century and that discussion of the surplus woman phenomenon resulted from exaggeration.³⁹ Hackett provides a more thorough consideration of the *Frauenüberschuß*. She begins her analysis by observing how frequently discussion of the female surplus emerged in contemporary commentary of the *Frauenfrage*.⁴⁰ Hackett demonstrates regional variation of marriage patterns and links anxiety regarding marital status to social class. But Hackett concludes her discussion of the female surplus by noting that, "Demography alone, however important its contributions, cannot explain the women's movement."⁴¹

The works of Frevert, Bussemer, and Hackett recognize the omnipresence of the belief in a female surplus, but omit important questions: why were unmarried women considered to be a noteworthy cohort? Why were they constructed as a problem to be solved? These histories of German single women do not explore the rhetorical resonance of the idea for both advocates and opponents of the women's movement. In contrast, the third and most predominant mode of interpreting the female surplus of Imperial Germany can be found in the historical works of James Albisetti, Marion Kaplan, Patricia Mazón, Elisabeth Meyer-Renschhausen, Barbara Greven-Aschoff, Nancy Reagin, Lora Wildenthal, and Bärbel Kuhn. Each of these scholars acknowledge that the female surplus played a powerful role in creating the vision, practical work, and bourgeois orientation of the early organized German women's movement.

In his study of teaching as a female profession, Albisetti notes “the perception that Germany had rather suddenly acquired a large number of unmarried women who had to provide for themselves. Open to question is the accuracy of the numbers cited at the time, but not the fact that most contemporary commentators believed that a new situation had arisen and required a response.”⁴² While Albisetti confirms that many Germans believed in a female surplus of recent advent, his project does not require an investigation into the numbers or nuances of the concept. Marion Kaplan offers a similar reading in her examination of Jewish middle-class women in Imperial Germany. Discussing Jewish marriage, Kaplan recognizes the importance of the fear of spinsterhood in nuptial negotiations and notes that extra women could become superfluous in the bourgeois household economy.⁴³ Kaplan maintains that “the much vaunted *Frauenüberschuß* ... meant that not every woman could marry. In fact, the situation was worse for Jewish women.”⁴⁴ Kaplan’s work identifies the surplus as a fact of life in the Jewish middle-class milieu but does not delve into its foundations.

In *Gender and the Modern Research University*, Patricia Mazón asserts that the German women’s movement saw female university study “in terms of the woman question and as a partial solution to it.”⁴⁵ Significantly informing the woman question were “several concrete areas of social anxiety,” among the most pressing of which were “changes in the family structure brought about by industrialization. Overall marriage rates were thought to be declining, leading to a group of ‘surplus’ women. The consequences were considered to be especially disastrous for the middle class.”⁴⁶ The concern over what to do with daughters of the middle-class displaced by the changing economy helped to promote the discussion of female university study.

Elisabeth Meyer-Renschhausen’s study of Bremen cites the dual shame associated with single status; not only had the *Alleinstehenden* failed to find a husband, but injury met with insult when they found themselves forced to look for work. The woman question was both an economic and moral question: “Although unmarried aunts and daughters could no longer be supported, within the urban middle-class it was still considered a dishonor to send them outside of the home to earn money. Paid female work harmed the reputation of the family.”⁴⁷ Meyer-Renschhausen adds that among the middle-class, “a further cause of the *Frauenfrage* was the constantly extending training period of the sons, so that many could not think of marrying before the thirtieth or fortieth year of life.”⁴⁸ The increased professional training required of bourgeois men left many prospective brides to ruminate over what they were to do as they waited for a good man to come along—and to begin to wonder whether the wait was worth it. Meyer-Renschhausen emphasizes that class status informed the *Kaiserreich* debate about the female surplus. The long-acknowledged link between bourgeois interests and the mainstream German women’s movement cannot simply be explained on the basis of sympathy with the “doctrine of liberal individualism”—and its success or failure cannot be haphazardly linked to the fate of German liberalism.⁴⁹ It would be superficial as well to suggest that the middle-class women’s movement evolved

purely out of the reformers' self-interest. The *Frauenüberschuß* adds an important element to discussions of middle-class bias in the German women's movement: the belief that bourgeois women faced exceptional and singular challenges as a result of changing economic circumstances.

In a study of the middle-class women's movement, Barbara Greven-Aschoff further elucidates the plight of unwed women. She notes the "problem of the *alte Jungfer* [old maid] as family calamity," and contends that the *Frauenüberschuß* manifested itself as a socio-psychological issue as well as a demographic event.⁵⁰ Among the middle and upper classes, the time a young woman spent waiting for "a possible marriage could hardly be filled with productive activity. In the course of industrialization and urbanization, numerous functions otherwise necessary for housekeeping had become unnecessary, leaving for the maturing female generation only a type of 'parasitic' existence."⁵¹ Shifting economic conditions necessitated vocational change: "In view of marriage chances becoming more uncertain, the necessity of enabling young women an existence outside of the family of origin emerged. In pre-industrial societies, convents or ladies' institutes offered such possibilities to women of class. In the modern, secularized society, it is the arena of work."⁵² Greven-Aschoff expands upon the argument of those nineteenth-century middle-class women's rights advocates who asserted that demography was not the defining element of the female surplus. It was instead a question of *Beruf* (vocation, calling). To what were single women called? The industrial age made this question all the more urgent. Middle-class women waiting to marry had the leisure to know that they were, indeed, waiting. Nancy Reagin makes a similar point in *A German Women's Movement*. In her history of class and gender in Hanover at the turn of the century, Reagin's examination of women's work grapples with the concept of the *Frauenüberschuß*. Reagin concludes that the demographic data likely do not support the notion of a distinct and new oversupply of women at the turn of the century.⁵³ Her work confirms the notion that "the perceived reality was that many German bourgeois women were destined to remain spinsters."⁵⁴

In her history of *German Women for Empire*, Lora Wildenthal sees the female surplus as a significant justification for a female presence in the colonies of Wilhelmine Germany. Wildenthal describes how "feminists and other commentators on the 'Woman Question' fretted over a supposed surplus of women who remained unmarried, lacked careers appropriate to their social station, and would waste their maternal energies."⁵⁵ Both radical reformer Minna Cauer and moderate activist Hedwig Heyl agreed that placing women in German settlements to partner with men would offer a pragmatic alleviation of the female surfeit, yet their vision went beyond absorbing a problematic cohort: "Marriage was a worthy goal ... but German women could not be restricted to a wifely position. They needed a larger role that would permit them to exert positive moral influence."⁵⁶ Colonial placement seemed to offer a fruitful solution to the overage of women, but such a way out evaded core questions: "The colonial Woman Question sidelined feminist demands for social change by emphasizing numbers of German

women rather than the conditions of their existence. It promised that unmarried middle-class women could be converted from a social problem in Germany into a solution for the colonies.⁵⁷ Social class is thus a key element of Wildenthal's assessment of the female surplus. In the colonial context, the *Frauenüberschuß* elicited both sympathy and scorn; by the turn of the century, groups involved in placing women in the colonies sought ideal candidates for marriage but turned away applicants who were overqualified or who seemed too desperate to marry.⁵⁸ Wildenthal's study establishes the link between conceptions of a domestic female surplus and the colonial woman question, but the book's primary engagement is with the interaction of nationalism, race, and gender.

Bärbel Kuhn's *Familienstand Ledig*, a comparative collective biography of German single men and women during the period extending from 1850 to 1914, confirms that the demographic notion of a female surplus was an illusion⁵⁹ and asserts that "the woman question was discussed in contemporary journalism and in the public sphere as a 'social question' of the bourgeoisie, as the affliction of the unmarried daughters of the bourgeois classes."⁶⁰ *The Surplus Woman* shares its topical focus with Kuhn's work. Kuhn's book approaches the topic of single marital status by emphasizing the history of everyday life, biography, and a comparison between the worldviews of single women and single men, while the present work delves into the contours of a cultural construction amid the broader context of the German women's movement. The female surplus is not the central concern of Kuhn's inquiry; as is the case with the other historical works just described, the general belief in a perceived overabundance of women is a basic assumption that sheds light on other areas of German women's history. None of these works tease out the social and cultural contours of that assumption, nor is it their intention to do so. In a wide range of historical writing on the experiences of German women, the basic importance and middle-class orientation of the *Frauenüberschuß* is recognized. The nature, meaning uses, and progenitors of the concept have not yet been addressed by historians. This book seeks to do just that.

Constructing the Surplus Woman

The story set forth here provides the history of the *Frauenüberschuß*, a concept that reflected cultural anxiety in the face of social and economic change, demonstrated the era's fascination with the findings of sexual and social science, and served as one of the most important tenets of the German women's movement. This book affirms through demographic analysis that the female surplus was not a real population event and argues that the notion was instead a cultural construction that was foundational to the moderate, radical, and religious German women's movements. At the same time, this study seeks to go beyond a narrative account of social movements in order to examine the ways in which this cultural construction emerged, shifted, and signified deep anxieties about modern life. The surplus woman was the lodestar of German women's movements, but simul-

taneously was also the source of renewed ridicule and anxiety about the unwed woman. Her paradoxical nature hints at the great ambivalence with which many Germans experienced the rapidly changing world around them.

Four goals guide this discussion of the female surplus. First and most basically, the project intends to demonstrate the centrality of the *Frauenüberschuß* concept to the ways in which Imperial Germans viewed the age of change in which they lived. The notion of an overabundance of women at once demonstrates the predominance of marriage and motherhood as the female ideal; it adds an important dimension to the link between class status and German feminism; and it clarifies the origins of the reform program pursued by the women's movement, one which emphasized educational and professional opportunities over political calls for suffrage and expanded legal rights. The female surplus both created an air of urgency that brought attention to calls for change and provided a potentially powerful group toward which to aim reform.

Second, *The Surplus Woman* affirms the importance of marital status as a category of historical analysis.⁶¹ Recent historical work has asserted the importance of marriage and marital status in our understanding of the past. Examining the history of US marriage, Nancy Cott has made a convincing case that “the whole system of attribution and meaning that we call *gender* relies on and to a great extent derives from the structuring provided by marriage.”⁶² Elizabeth Heineman's *What Difference does a Husband Make? Women and Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany* (1999) asserts “the proposition that marital status has, through much of Western history, been a basic category of difference for women, in some ways analogous to race, class, and gender.”⁶³ My work shares in that proposition. The category of marital status provides a very useful lens from which to investigate a society's leading assumptions about gender politics. Studying the signification of married men in the Soviet Union offers important insights into the social profile of the increasingly fragile Communist state.⁶⁴ Asking about the making of wives in colonial India contributes to our understanding of the turbulent interplay of custom, empire, and modernity.⁶⁵ Research into the meanings attributed to marital status sheds historical light on the configuration of gender, the rule of law, the importance of tradition, and the interrelationship of religious and civil life.

Equally important is the historical fluidity of marriage as a signifying category. Does marital status matter less in a certain time and place—or does it matter, say, more for women and less for men? Do widows and widowers form their own social cohort, and do they have more power in some cultures than others? To what extent did people talk about marriage or marital cohort within a specific historical context? These questions matter deeply to our understanding of the past. In the context of post–World War II and divided Germany, Heineman has argued that, “women's marital status is a profound cultural marker; it has striking material ramifications; and it is laden with political significance. Marital status no longer defines women as sharply as it did early in the [twentieth] century, but it has undergone an incomplete revolution.”⁶⁶ *The Surplus Woman* provides the

history of the conceptualization of single women in Imperial Germany, an era in which marital status mattered greatly in defining womanhood.

The third intent of this book is to help dismantle the paradigmatic view of the German women's movement as a dichotomous entity. Beginning with Richard Evans' work in 1976, the split between moderate and left-wing camps has dominated the scholarship of organized female activism in Germany. Certainly, the ideological and programmatic tension between moderates and radicals is well documented.⁶⁷ Archival material facilitates the predominance of the dichotomy, as protagonists from both sides left behind folders about the "*linken Flügel* (left-wing)" and the "*Gemässigen* (moderates)." But reliance on this bifurcated model does disservice to the two 'camps' involved, as well as to the movement as a whole. The socialist women's movement, led by Clara Zetkin, Lily Braun, and Luise Zietz, tends to be considered separately from both the moderates and radicals.⁶⁸ Women's organizations under a religious banner have also been viewed primarily as particularized entities.⁶⁹ The historiography of German women's activism to date has disproportionately reflected a vision of fragmentation—yet so many 'herstorical' paths tend to reify the organizational structure of the German women's movement. They do not allow for the consideration of commonalities, nor do they reveal the ideological complexity that guided so many disparate branches toward sometimes very similar ends.

The Surplus Woman joins with other historical works of the last twenty years that have sought to break down the model of left versus right. Nancy Reagin has rightly pointed out that the division into camps became far easier after the 1908 reform of the Law of Association, which permitted women to join and participate in the work of political parties. The 1910 split in the major leadership organization of the women's movement also sharpened divisions.⁷⁰ But Reagin's work makes clear that in the city of Hanover, even after 1910, a "politically 'neutral,' professional women's sphere" was the realm in which most female reformers sought to maneuver.⁷¹ Raffael Scheck's historical examination of female politics in Weimar Germany has urged scholars to recognize the broad range of perspectives even within political interest groups.⁷² The work of historians like Reagin and Scheck compel the field to move beyond the predominance of factions and to search anew for both commonality and difference.

This book argues that a variety of women, arguing from different perspectives, shared the view that the female surplus was changing women's lives. Mainstream moderates, vocal radicals, committed socialists, and religious leaders all articulated as a reason for their advocacy the belief that the industrial age had forever altered the conditions of female existence. All responded to the perceived crisis by suggesting that single women had something unique to offer the greater German society, be it via the professions; through maternal influence; as exemplars of the abuses of capitalism; or as living emblems of Marian purity in the modern world. These very distinct responses reflected different ideological bases, but commingled in a prevailing belief in the innate power of women. A shared vision of female potentiality—rather than a common feminism—united the branches

of the German women's movement. Analysis of the female surplus demonstrates a strong intellectual and spiritual connection, albeit structurally weak, between camps traditionally viewed as divided. Only when historians shed the prevailing paradigm of the dichotomous women's movement can the examination of other possible common threads commence.

The fourth aim of this project is, as much as possible, to examine the German women's movement in the terms of the world in which it emerged and which it sought to change. In this regard, my work follows in the path of historian Ann Taylor Allen, who has argued against "the tendency to judge the history of feminism according to criteria derived from the present."⁷³ Her study of 'spiritual motherhood' as a pillar of German feminism asks it readers to consider the "context of a specifically German national culture and German conceptions of citizenship."⁷⁴ Sociologist Margit Götttert, in a historical study of Helene Lange and Gertrud Bäumer, has described an "*emotionale Überschuss* (emotional excess)" that can arise when modern feminists confront the historical legacy of the first German women's movement. Götttert believes that such emotion "is not only a sign of disappointment over a 'politically incorrect' biography ... It also refers to the [historical] individuals themselves, whose life plans, activities, and political concepts are not so entirely comprehensible to the modern feminist vision, because they do not seem to fit into a conventional pattern."⁷⁵ Many leading figures of the women's movement argued from the standpoint that women are fundamentally different from men. Maternalist values, the sanctification of marriage, and despair over the prospect of diminishing marital prospects were all legitimate grounds from which the women described in this book argued for female liberation from subjugation. Such a posture is paradoxical when viewed from the vantage point of twenty-first century feminism. But in order to listen to the voices of the past, we must attempt to hear their original intonations.

Another historical work which has contributed to the historical approach of *The Surplus Woman* is Kevin Repp's *Reformers, Critics, and the Paths of German Modernity: Anti-Politics and the Search for Alternatives*. Repp's book identifies a reformist generation of the 1890s composed "of intellectuals and activists who stood firmly on modern ground at the *fin-de-siècle* but who were determined to reform that modernity in order to free it from darkening shadows already plainly visible on the horizon before the First World War."⁷⁶ Repp's reformers "felt just as at home with the discourse of cultural despair as they did with the discourse of progressive optimism."⁷⁷ The progenitors of the female surplus fit well into the reformist milieu described by Repp. Belief in and discussion about a *Frauenüberschuss* reflected the despair of a society wracked by extraordinary demographic and economic change. But the solutions to the surfeit offered by women's rights advocates also revealed a belief in social improvement borne out of reformist activity. Such efforts occupied what Repp has called a "quiet labyrinth of indirect avenues that led into the sub-terranean world of Wilhelmine anti-politics," a world which included "scientific studies, detailed proposals, legalistic reports ... professional careers, personal connections ... popular education, alternative

lifestyles, and many other strategies designed to make an immediate, palpable difference in the quality of people's lives."⁷⁸ Most of the reformers identified in this book were active primarily in the sphere outside of and beyond politics. They sought to make a difference in the life of the surplus women emerging out of the "darkening shadows" of the *Kaiserreich*. If they were successful, single women then might be best suited to lead the progression to a better nation and world.

The Surplus Woman assesses the female surplus as a dominant concept within the culture of Imperial Germany that helped to formulate gendered understandings of work, sex, class, and the role of marriage and motherhood in society. Cultural precepts and norms created the notion of the female surplus, and the belief in a female surplus in turn helped to reformulate the culture. The historian cannot extract the debate about 'too many women' from an environment in which such a statement could be made without tongue in cheek. Yet making that historical leap reveals the potentiality of the surplus woman. Organized German women of the *Kaiserreich* appropriated the plight of the single woman in their campaign to transform the society that had placed the unwed in such a predicament in the first place.

This book combines the approaches of cultural, social, and gender history. It is primarily a cultural history due to its engagement with the nuances of a discourse. In grappling with the ridicule surrounding unwed women, the text also provides a glimpse into what it may have felt like to live in German society as a single middle-class woman. *The Surplus Woman* employs the traditions of social history by examining the unwed female cohort via the lens of demography and by providing further historical evidence of the importance of social class as a fundamental predictor of experience—for the middle-class provided both the commentators who identified the perils of surplus-hood and the women who led the movement to provide rights for singles. Finally, this book builds upon the field of gender history by arguing for the importance of marital status as a category of analysis. Imperial Germans interpreted marital prospects as primarily female concerns; this study of unwed women then offers a gendered reading of German society by exploring the nature of a cohort that was simultaneously considered vulnerable and threatening.

Two main sections form the book. Because this is foremost the history of a constructed notion, the text opens with a consideration of the surplus woman as a cultural icon. Chapter 1 examines cultural and literary employment of stereotypes of the *alte Jungfer*, the German old maid who gained prominence in an era of economic change. The intensifying vilification of the 'old maid' in light of research into sexuality is considered in chapter 2. A demographic examination of the female surplus comprises chapter 3. Chapter 4 identifies the ways in which the construction of the female surplus combined with the ideology of spiritual motherhood to establish the mission of the mainstream German women's movement.

The second section offers a collective biography of seven prominent "women standing alone." Chapter 5 considers the work of education reformer Helene Lange and social work advocate Alice Salomon. These moderates embraced a maternalist

vision that limited female professions predominantly to unwed women. Chapter 6 explores the work of activists Helene Stöcker, Ruth Bré, and Lily Braun, each of whom saw radical potential in the female surplus. The *Frauenüberschuß* inspired these women to ask far-reaching questions regarding sexuality, single motherhood, and the viability of the institution of marriage. Chapter 7 investigates the socialist reading of the female surfeit by looking at the writings of Clara Zetkin. Building upon the work August Bebel, Zetkin considered the perceived excess of bourgeois women to be evidence of the failings of modern society, demonstrating that the industrial mode of production had forced middle-class women into competition with the working-class. The final chapter examines the unusual life and work of Elisabeth Gnauck-Kühne, a leader of the German religious women's movement. Gnauck-Kühne was a trained economist and statistician who saw in the surplus woman proof of the sacred female mission on earth.

As the reader embarks along the path I have set forth, a letter from one leading German women's rights advocate to another—Gertrud Bäumer writing to Elisabeth Gnauck-Kühne—provides an apt reminder about the nature of historical scholarship:

I am not of the opinion that there is in the writing of history an objectivity, an objective accuracy in the sense of mathematics . . . In the selection, arrangement, summary, and orientation of the facts, along with other evaluations based upon perspective, each representation of history contains a certain vision of the world. From the core outward, this vision assigns the important and insignificant, the interesting and uninteresting, sees certain lines of development as emphasized above all, and judges in this way or that the manifold ambiguous questions, in which a whole complex of causes are involved.⁷⁹

Undoubtedly, my own vision of the world is present in this description of Imperial German society and the lives of the women I see as important within it. As many voices have been included, hundreds more have been left out. I believe that the most interesting and significant have remained. This book does not contend that the *Frauenüberschuß* can explain the 'whole complex of causes' that created the German women's movement. But I am certain that the cultural, social, and gender history of Imperial Germany cannot be understood without it.

Notes

1. *Die Frau* 1(1) (October 1893): 1.
2. Helene Lange, "Was wir wollen," *Die Frau* 1(1) (October 1893): 1.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 2.
5. Elisabeth Gnauck-Kühne, *Goldene Früchte aus Märchenland. Märchen für jung und alt* (Bremen, 1904).

6. Gnauck-Kühne, *Früchte*, "Die Nachtigall," 100.
7. *Ibid.*, 101.
8. *Ibid.*, 102–105.
9. *Ibid.*, 105.
10. *Ibid.*, 106–107; *Ich suche mein Leid und mein Lied*.
11. Gnauck-Kühne to Augustin Rösler, 16 September 1900, in Helene Simon, *Elisabeth Gnauck-Kühne*, vol. 2, *Heimat* (M. Gladbach, 1929), 196–197.
12. The term connotes 'single women.'
13. See Eduard von Hartmann, "Die Jungferfrage," *Die Gegenwart* (34) (35) (1891): 113–116; 131–134; Ludwig Langemann, *Auf falschem Weg. Beiträge zur Kritik der radikalen Frauenbewegung* (Berlin, 1913); Bärbel Kuhn, *Familienstand Ledig: Ehelose Frauen und Männer im Bürgertum (1850–1914)* (Cologne, 2000), 37–100; Ute Planert, *Antifeminismus im Kaiserreich* (Göttingen, 1998).
14. Helene Lange and Gertrud Bäumer, eds., *Handbuch der Frauenbewegung* (Berlin, 1902).
15. Robert Wilbrandt and Lisbeth Wilbrandt, *Die Deutsche Frau im Beruf*, in *Handbuch*, vol. 4, eds. Lange and Bäumer, 19–20.
16. Theobald Ziegler, *Die geistigen und sozialen Strömungen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1911), 571–572.
17. While single women's studies is expanding (see especially <http://www.medusanet.ca/single-women/> [accessed 13 April 2006]), relatively little scholarship has investigated the notion of a population surplus of unwed individuals. One exception, coming from the fields of psychology and sociology, is Marcia Guttentag and Paul F. Secord, *Too Many Women? The Sex Ratio Question* (Beverly Hills, CA, 1983).
18. Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide, "A Singular Past," in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250–1800*, eds. Bennett and Froide (Philadelphia, 1999), 4.
19. *Ibid.*, 7–13.
20. *Ibid.*, 14, 15.
21. Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920* (Chicago, 1985), 6.
22. *Ibid.*, 7.
23. Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York, 1990), 3.
24. *Ibid.*, 19.
25. Rita Kranidis, *The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration* (New York, 1999), 131.
26. *Ibid.*, 174; emphasis in text.
27. *Ibid.*, 178.
28. Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927* (Chicago, 1994), 154.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin de Siècle France* (Chicago, 2002), 247.
31. *Ibid.*, 246.
32. For an overview of historical analysis of national identity, see Nancy Reagin, "Recent Work on German National Identity: Regional? Imperial? Gendered? Imaginary?," *Central European History* 37(2) (2004): 273–289.
33. On the evolution of sexual scholarship in central Europe, see Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity* (Chicago, 2000); on the influence of social science in imperial Germany, see Erik Grimmer-Solem, *The Rise of Historical Economics and Social Reform in Germany, 1864–1894* (New York, 2003).
34. On the impact of decreasing birth rates on the women's movement, see Ann Taylor Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Western Europe 1890–1970* (New York, 2005), 10–11.
35. On the crisis of surplus women in post-World War II Germany, see Elizabeth D. Heineman,

- What Difference Does a Husband Make? Women and Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany* (Berkeley, CA, 1999), 108–136.
36. Roberts, *Civilization*, 6.
 37. Richard Evans, *The Feminist Movement in Germany, 1894–1933* (Beverly Hills, CA, 1976).
 38. Ute Frevert, *Women in German History*, trans. Stuart McKinnon-Evans (New York, 1989), 119.
 39. Herrad-Ulrike Bussemer, *Frauenemanzipation und Bildungsbürgertum* (Weinheim, 1985), 23ff.
 40. Amy Hackett, “The Politics of Feminism in Wilhelmine Germany, 1890–1918” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1976), 40.
 41. *Ibid.*, 66.
 42. James Albisetti, *Schooling German Girls and Women, Secondary Education in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1988), 99.
 43. Marion Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class. Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany* (New York, 1991), 99, 171.
 44. *Ibid.*, 171–172.
 45. Patricia Mazón, *Gender and the Modern Research University: The Admission of Women to German Higher Education, 1865–1914* (Stanford, CA, 2003), 51.
 46. *Ibid.*, 51–52.
 47. Elisabeth Meyer-Renschhausen, *Weibliche Kultur und soziale Arbeit; Eine Geschichte der Frauenbewegung am Beispiel Bremens, 1810–1927* (Cologne, 1989), 77.
 48. *Ibid.*
 49. Evans, *Feminist Movement*, 1.
 50. Barbara Greven-Aschoff, *Die Bürgerliche Frauenbewegung in Deutschland, 1894–1933* (Göttingen, 1981), 46, 47.
 51. *Ibid.*, 47.
 52. *Ibid.*
 53. Nancy Reagin, *A German Women’s Movement: Class and Gender in Hanover, 1880–1933* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995), 101, 277.
 54. *Ibid.*, 101.
 55. Lora Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884–1945* (Durham, NC, 2001), 6.
 56. *Ibid.*, 135; the citation specifically addresses Cauer’s activism, but describes Heyl’s vision as well; for a description of Heyl’s views, see 162–168.
 57. *Ibid.*, 6.
 58. *Ibid.*, 164.
 59. Kuhn, *Familienstand*, 39.
 60. *Ibid.*, 37–38.
 61. Joan Wallach Scott’s influential essay, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), 28–50, made the case that “gender ... provides a way to decode meaning and to understand the complex connections among various forms of human interaction” (*Ibid.*, 45–46). Both as a function and a creative factor of gender, marital status is a category that “legitimizes and constructs social relationships” (*Ibid.*, 46).
 62. Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 3; emphasis in text.
 63. Heineman, *What Difference*, xii.
 64. Francine du Plessix Gray, *Soviet Women* (New York, 1989), 7–9, 32–39.
 65. Antoinette Burton, “From Child Bride to ‘Hindoo Lady’: Rukhmabai and the Debate on Sexual Respectability in Imperial Britain,” *American Historical Review* 103 (4) (1998): 1119–1146.
 66. Heineman, *What Difference*, 246.
 67. See Evans, *Feminist Movement*, 35ff.; Ute Gerhard, *Unerhört. Die Geschichte der deutsche Frauenbewegung* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1992), 138–162, 216–279; Greven-Aschoff, 87–107;

- Hackett, 151–171. On the historiography regarding the division between moderate and radical feminism, see Jean Quataert, “Writing the History of Women and Gender in Imperial Germany,” in *Society, Culture, and the State in Germany, 1870–1930*, ed. Geoff Eley (Ann Arbor, MI, 1997), 51–55.
68. See Karen Honeycutt, “Clara Zetkin: A Socialist Approach to the Problem of Women’s Oppression,” *Feminist Studies* 3 (1976): 131–144, and “Socialism and Feminism in Imperial Germany,” *Signs* 5(1) (1979): 30–41; Alfred Meyer, *The Feminism and Socialism of Lily Braun* (Bloomington, IN, 1985); Jean Quataert, *Reluctant Feminists in German Social Democracy, 1885–1917* (Princeton, 1979).
 69. See Ursula Baumann, *Protestantismus und Frauenemanzipation in Deutschland, 1850–1920* (Frankfurt, 1992); Alfred Kall, *Katholische Frauenbewegung in Deutschland* (Paderborn, 1983).
 70. See Kevin Repp, *Reformers, Critics, and the Paths of German Modernity: Anti-Politics and the Search for Alternatives, 1890–1914* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 119–128.
 71. Reagin, *Women’s Movement*, 185.
 72. Raffael Scheck, “Women against Versailles: Maternalism and Nationalism of Female Bourgeois Politicians in the Early Weimar Republic,” *German Studies Review* 22(1) (1999): 33.
 73. Ann Taylor Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Germany, 1800–1914* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1991), 5; for a case like that described by Allen, see Renate Bridenthal, “‘Professional’ Housewives: Stepsisters of the Women’s Movement,” in *When Biology became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (New York, 1984), 153–155, in which it is argued that “German bourgeois feminism meandered through the early twentieth century with an ideological profile so low as to bring its feminist credentials into question” (154).
 74. Allen, *Feminism* (1991), 11.
 75. Margit Göttert, *Macht und Eros: Frauenbeziehungen und weibliche Kultur um 1900—eine neue Perspektive auf Helene Lange und Gertrud Bäumer* (Königstein, 2000), 10.
 76. Repp, *Reformers*, 13.
 77. *Ibid.*, 14.
 78. *Ibid.*
 79. Archiv der Katholischer Deutscher Frauenbund, Nachlass Elisabeth Gnauck-Kühne, Ordnen 15; letter undated, context suggests 1912.