Female Eagles

Around 300,000 German women and girls served as Luftwaffenhelferinnen during the Second World War. As **Victoria Taylor** explains, their presence reflected the growing demands of the German air war and were also an important anomaly in Nazi gender roles for women.

In November 1942, the German propaganda magazine '*Der Adler*' ('The Eagle') ran a feature on the women who were under service with the Luftwaffe. In that feature, the writer proclaimed that:

'The call of the Luftwaffe will be joyfully received by the German girls, who now also have the opportunity to strengthen the German front wherever they are deployed - and to secure the final victory.'

The jingoistic nature of this piece of propaganda aside, it nevertheless reflected Nazi Germany's increasing utilisation of womanpower during the Second World War. Half a million German women and girls went on to serve their country as Wehrmachthelferinnen (assistants of the German Armed Forces) between 1939 to 1945; of these, up to 300,000 filled a variety of auxiliary roles with the Luftwaffe as Luftwaffenhelferinnen: female Luftwaffe assistants.

Previously, the Luftwaffenhelferinnen have only inspired fleeting, subsidiary mentions in most English-language texts. More thorough studies have been conducted in German by the likes of Ursula von Gersdorff, Franka Maubach and Kathryn Kompisch, but these works often

Luftwaffenhelferinnen at the Luftwaffe command post in Deelen, Netherlands, during 1944. The women are working in the vast 'Diogenes' bunker which was one of the German control centres for the air defence of the Reich. The women are operating Lichtpunktwerfer (spotlight projectors) to mark enemy air movements onto a glass wall map. Noteworthy is the fact that they are not wearing uniforms.

■ ***Left:*** **Female volunteers clean 2cm Flak shells at a base in Germany as Luftwaffe personnel supervise. It is not clear if these women are formally Luftwaffenhelferinnen or simply volunteers. Either way, women volunteered in their tens of thousands for service with the Luftwaffe.** *(AS)*

■ ***Right:*** **The appeal of service to German women was greatly enhanced by a snappy uniform which was illustrated in this glamorous recruitment poster exhorting German womanhood to 'Hilf Siegen' – or to help towards victory.**

> "The German government began conscripting women from November 1942 until March 1945, although the somewhat arbitrary and reluctant implementation of this policy demonstrated the Nazis' general unwillingness to alter the woman's role in war."

lack the necessary space to discuss the Luftwaffenhelferinnen at any great length. This has allowed certain misconceptions to become reinforced, such as the frequent reference to all Luftwaffenhelferinnen as Blitzmädchen, or Blitzmädels (lightning girls). In fact, this nickname *technically* only applied to the Luftnachrichtenhelferinnen (female air signals assistants) as their uniform sleeves bore lightning bolts.

The lack of historical scrutiny paid to Luftwaffenhelferinnen, however, can be partially attributed to the fact that, as Rosemarie Killius has written, traditional military historiography has often seen:

'...mostly male historians deal[ing] exclusively with male actors.'

The few English language sources that mention the Luftwaffenhelferinnen often focus on their uniforms and insignia, rather than the women who wore them. Pointing this out is not to detract from this important area of research, but rather it is to explain why the remarkable and complicated story of the Luftwaffenhelferinnen remains little told in the history of the Third Reich.

NIGHT FIGHTER DIRECTIONS

Following the Nazi government's passing of the Wehrdienstgesetz (National Service Act) on 21 May 1935, every German man and woman became obliged: *'...to provide services for the Fatherland in the event of war.'* However, 'racially-pure' German women were expected to birth healthy children to serve the National Socialist Fatherland and its doting Führer, Adolf Hitler. These women and girls were encouraged to nurture the 'kleine Welt' ('little world') of their husbands and children; their prescribed role in war was to provide the emotional and domestic support necessary for their soldier husbands to secure the final victory.

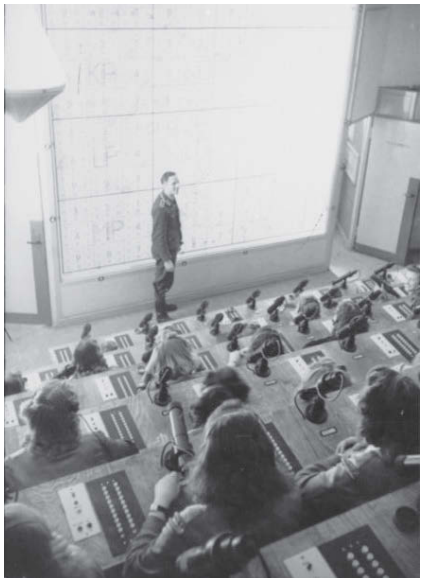
As the tides of war turned from late 1942, a gender dilemma seized Nazi Germany. Though the Luftwaffe had secretly employed women as 'airfield controllers' as early as 1933, women remained notably underutilised in the Wehrmacht. Following heavy German losses sustained in the invasion of Russia, and the failed campaign in North Africa, women were needed to: *'...free a* [male] *soldier for the front'*. The German government thus began conscripting women from November 1942 until March 1945, although the somewhat arbitrary and reluctant implementation of this policy demonstrated the Nazis' general unwillingness to alter the woman's role in war.

These single women were often drawn from the Bund Deutscher Mädel

■ **A unit of Luftwaffenhelferinnen march to work through the streets of Paris.** *(BA)*

(the League of German Maidens) or the Reichsarbeitsdienst (Reich Labour Service) and ranged from 15 to 45 years in age. On joining, they worked in the Nachrichtendienst (Air Signals Service), Flugmeldedienst (Aircraft Reporting Service), Luftschutzwarndienst (Air Raid Warning Service), Sanitätsdienst (Medical Service), Bürodienst (Office or Clerical Service) and Wetterdienst (the Weather Service).

Towards the end of the war, they also helped direct Luftwaffe night-fighter units and - more controversially - defended their homeland as Flakwaffenhelferinnen (anti-aircraft assistants). Meanwhile, Luftwaffenhelferinnen would become indispensable to German efforts in temporarily counteracting Operation CORONA from 1943. This operation saw the Royal Air Force hack into the Luftwaffe's radio frequencies and use German-speaking operators to give its personnel conflicting orders - forcing them to land or to divert course. The Germans retaliated by instead using Luftwaffenhelferinnen to direct the pilots, with their distinctly female and regional dialects cutting through the chaos of the confusing male orders.



A view from behind the plotter girls seen in the lead image to this feature and showing the glass map onto which they plotted the movement of aircraft.

Operating barrage balloons was another duty assigned to the Luftwaffenhelferinnen.

FASHIONABLE AESTHETICS

For some of the younger girls, the allure of the smart Luftwaffenhelferinnen uniforms encouraged them to join up. A Nazi recruitment newsreel from 1942 played upon this fashionable aesthetic, declaring that:

'...every Nachrichtenhelferin gets a uniform, two blouses, several stockings and shoes, a coat and the fetching little Schiffchen [boat-shaped hat]'.

Gerda R, who ended up serving as a Blitzmädchen in the Heer (army), admitted after her friend had showed her pictures that:

'...the uniform in the Wehrmacht looked good – the little Schiffchen above all!'.

From 1943, certain women joined the Luftwaffe's auxiliary services to escape the immediate dangers of the Allied bombing campaign. Some had even lost their homes and belongings in the resulting firestorms before they signed up. For most, serving alongside the Heer, Kriegsmarine or Luftwaffe simply offered an exciting departure from domestic life. Though a small number of Luftwaffenhelferinnen were employed as kitchen staff and cleaners, the majority learned war-related skills and were able to travel abroad. Some of the more desirable locations – especially Norway –were preferable to taking a less glamorous job in the Reich as a munitions factory worker, say.

Women who served in the Aircraft Reporting Service manned radar stations, listening posts and reporting stations. Some worked as Fernsprecherinnen (telephone operators), Fernschreiberinnen (telex operators) and Funkerinnen (radio operators). Others were called upon to visually gauge the size, position, and potential destination of enemy aircraft and to report this to anti-aircraft batteries. There, too, women served as Flakwaffenhelferinnen after the dedicated Anti-Aircraft Auxiliary absorbed female volunteers in October 1943. Women in the Air Raid Warning Service, meanwhile, served as air raid wardens and paramedics, whilst Krankenschwestern (nurses) in the Luftwaffe Medical Services tended to the air force's casualties and patients.

DANGERS OF BOMBARDMENT

Much of the Luftwaffenhelferinnen's work demanded immense concentration and excellent communication skills. Annemarie Zarnikow, who served as a Luftnachrichtenhelferin, recalled how she and 15 other girls learnt to 'funken' (to 'spark' – or use Morse code), operate the telephones and quickly process and convey air traffic reports to appropriate Luftwaffe units. They tracked reports of enemy aircraft spotted across a large, gridded map of Germany which listed each potential target location with two coded letters and a number. The air reports came from the 'Fluko' (Flight Monitoring Command) and the 'Wako' (Guard Command). Zarnikow recalled that:

'For each type of aircraft (bomber or fighter) there were certain stamps - for fighters, narrow arrows; for bombers, rhombuses with a point cut off from the long side. The two serving helpers stood in the narrow space behind the map, so they saw Germany reversed. They had headphones on (one for 'Fluko' and one for 'Wako') and then stamped the information they received...into the corresponding grid squares.'

Operating radios came with the

■ A Luftwaffenhelferinnen attached to the Flugmeldedienst, or aircraft reporting service, operates a sound locator tracking bombers.

■ This Luftwaffenhelferinnen, who is serving in a Flak unit, wears the later pattern M43 cap which replaced the less practical 'Schiffchen' hat.

■ The workwear outfit of the Luftwaffenhelferinnen from the later war period. This clothing would most likely be worn by women working on Flak batteries, handling barrage balloons etc.

tricky challenge of *'Tönesalat'* (or 'tone salad') - the crackling noise of the line. In addition, the code was changed every three days to maintain secrecy and the Luftnachrichtenhelferinnen had to both decrypt and encrypt the messages they received before transferring them further down the line. Also, they were sometimes directly exposed to the dangers of aerial bombardment, as were the Flakwaffenhelferinnen, Flugmeldehelferinnen, Auswerterinnen (air traffic evaluators), female air raid wardens and paramedics.

Nurses in the Luftwaffe Medical Services struggled from 1944 when hygiene standards plummeted due to a lack of time, money, and resources. In occupied territories, the Luftwaffenhelferinnen were also vulnerable to partisan attacks. Here, the Nazi disdain for 'Flintenweiber' ('shotgun broads') – the 'unnatural' Soviet women who bore arms – had to be disregarded, and these Luftwaffenhelferinnen were trained to use firearms in self-defence. A similar weakening of this National Socialist belief was seen with the Flakwaffenhelferinnen from 1945. Initially limited to operating searchlights, fire control equipment and barrage balloons, these women were eventually given permission to operate anti-aircraft guns against the Allied invaders. Indeed, they were the only women in service who could qualify for the award of a combat badge: the Flakabzeichen.

'Der Adler' magazine praised the women for carrying out their work: *'...as quickly and reliably as if they had never had another profession.'* Additionally, they were often celebrated in Nazi propaganda newsreels. Despite the hyper-masculine world they entered, the Luftwaffenhelferinnen refused to shed their femininity when fulfilling their 'war duty'. Lotte Vogt, who served as a Flakhelferin, described how:

'...we did not forget that we are girls. We did not want to adopt uncouth manners. We certainly were no rough warriors - always simply women.'

However, women were not always well received by their male colleagues. One Luftwaffe fighter pilot held in a British POW interrogation centre dismissed the wartime contributions of women in March 1943, commenting on their role in Britain, for example:

'...the English are on their last legs. They have got women working everywhere. It's a question of personnel.'

Doubtless, his views about the Luftwaffenhelferinnen would have been equally dismissive.

■ Typical cloth emblems worn by Luftwaffenhelferinnen include a Flak service shield and Oberhelferin's chevrons (top) and an air raid warning speciality patch along with cap eagle.

GENDER EXPECTATIONS

The Luftnachrichtenhelferinnen's nickname of Blitzmädchen (lightning girls) was sometimes used derogatively in the sense of a 'flasher girl': a woman of loose morals and who showed off her private parts. Some men even referred to them as 'Blitzhuren' – 'lightning whores' – as they spread lurid rumours as to the women's willingness to sleep with the male Luftwaffe personnel.

Upon further inspection, an even more sinister undertone to these jibes becomes apparent. As a captured Oberleutnant fighter pilot was overheard saying to a Leutnant bomber pilot in August 1942, the men: *'...have special houses where we can take them.'*

The latter then comments on his own experiences with the Blitzmädels, claiming that:

'...those women throw themselves at us.'

Yet a British intelligence report written during the post-war disarmament of the Luftwaffe recorded that:

'The average Helferinnen [in the Luftwaffe Medical Services] was dirty, slovenly in her habits, and badly dressed. They were apparently encouraged to produce babies for the Führer, in liaison with members of the Luftwaffe. Nurseries were provided on the larger G.A.F. [German Air Force] stations to look after these illegitimate children.'

Unusually, Luftwaffenhelferinnen who served on Flak batteries could qualify for the for the Flak badge, or Flakabzeichen, although relatively few were ever issued.

This indicates that (however flawed this intelligence generalisation might well have been), and despite their pioneering work, the Luftwaffenhelferinnen were unable to escape the Nazis' gender expectations entirely: subjected to sexism, derision and potentially assault and abuse. For example, Emmy F, who served as a Flakwaffenhelferin in Frankfurt, spoke of how:

'...we were used and cheated out of our best years...we were young and obedient, and the old war-disabled men and Nazi bigshots who trained us often treated us so outrageously.'

In addition, the women's military affiliation rendered them particularly vulnerable to the advancing Soviet troops. Zarnikow herself had a lucky escape on 11 April 1945, when she and her fellow Luftwaffenhelferinnen were

Luftwaffenhelferinnen were often in harms way, just like their male colleagues. This is the certificate for a wound badge in silver issued to a flak helper in 1944. *(IC)*

Air Ministry Weekly Intelligence Summary no.293, 14 April 1945

Only at the end of the war were Allied intelligence services in any position to assess the nature of German women auxiliaries, their initial summaries on the matter making for revealing reading:

'It would seem from the issue of only one uniform blouse and skirt that that the women are not expected to wear their uniform at all times. The Ausweis of one POW revealed that from October 1942 to August 1944 she had but one issue of uniform, although she spent all of that time in foreign service in Paris. Regulations as to the manner of wearing the uniform are not insisted on. The wearing of a uniform does not seem compulsory. One POW stated it was required on duty, but others have said it was not compulsory at any time. Characteristic is the attitude of one POW, who did not wear her uniform in Brussels because people were less friendly to her if they recognised her for what she was.'

The Ausweis documents taken from captured Luftwaffenhelferinnen at the end of the war helped the Allies build something of a picture about the organisation of the female auxiliary services, albeit that that picture was sometimes a little flawed.

The same summary presented a low opinion of the Luftwaffenhelferinnen, going on to say:

'Although it is realised that conclusions drawn from such a small number of POWs are far from reliable, the difference in attitude, morals and morale of the Air Force and Army Auxiliaries is so distinct as to be noteworthy. The Army auxiliaries are first carefully schooled in patriotism before volunteering to serve and only accepted if deemed worthy. This careful selection puts them in a class apart from the women of the Luftwaffe who join for money, travel or to avoid forced labour in a factory.'

■ The Luftwaffenhelferinnen service brooch.

■ *Right:* These Luftwaffenhelferinnen, captured at the end of the war, face an uncertain future. Around 20,000 Wehrmachthelferinnen taken prisoner by the Soviets would end up dying in captivity.

urged to *'Geht nach Hause, Mädels!'* ('go home, girls!') from their barracks in Hildesheim. Two days later, she went back to fetch some personal belongings, but everything had already been ransacked and stolen.

In fact, somewhere around 20,000 Wehrmachthelferinnen died in Soviet POW camps during the war, but it is not known how many would have been Luftwaffenhelferinnen, or how many of them were killed, went missing or were potentially raped during the Allied advance.

'WOMEN OF THEIR TIME'

Research into the Luftwaffenhelferinnen, however, has been hampered by their contested historical legacy. On the one hand, they signify one of many intriguing wartime exceptions to the Nazi preaching about women simply being homemakers. On the other hand, as Sabine Kalff pointed out:

'Participation in the war meant participation in National Socialism - which nobody bragged about after the end of the war.'

Indeed, the role that women played in upholding the National Socialist state – whether actively or passively – is well documented. Generally, they were certainly very much part of such enablement.

Nevertheless, many of the Luftwaffenhelferinnen's testimonies suggest that some did consider themselves separate from the more ardent party supporters at the time. Zarnikow criticised how:

'...the party people were excited and sometimes aggressive [at the end of the war]...though they had ordered combat to the last drop of blood, they themselves prepared to flee.'

Meanwhile, Emmy F recalled the Luftwaffenhelferinnen's treatment, specifically at the hands of the 'Nazibonzen' ('Nazi bigshots'), whilst Erna K claimed that party politics simply did not interest most of the women:

'We were young, around 20, and had so many other things going on in our minds. Naturally, we wanted to do something for our country. And we were told that each one of us could replace a soldier for the front. That made us proud, and we felt important.'

One should exercise caution in accepting these eyewitness accounts at face value, but as Killius has written, the Luftwaffenhelferinnen were *'women of their time.'* In other words, women who grew up in a dictatorship where millions of their fellow Germans fell prey to the collective Nazi dream of a 'new' Germany. For many, simply being part of an unprecedented military sisterhood that aided their fellow German was what mattered to them the most. As one Flakwaffenhelferin veteran explained, the women ultimately cherished *'the good comradeship - the one for all.'*

Acknowledging this fact is not to excuse those Luftwaffenhelferinnen who did believe fervently in National Socialism. However, it is to provide a more comprehensive answer as to *why* these women joined the Luftwaffe's auxiliaries and to shed light on the personal worth the women collectively and individually found in serving their country.

Recognising that the Luftwaffenhelferinnen were both brave and steadfast in their wartime redefinition of Nazi gender roles is not the same as celebrating them. Nevertheless, highlighting the extraordinary role of these 'ordinary' women offers more balance to the common generalisation of women as helpless victims, passive observers, or even fanatic accomplices in the Third Reich.