In a rare, direct editorial address to her readers, Helene Stöcker opened the 14 August 1914 edition of The New Generation by commenting on what was undoubtedly the most important geopolitical event of her generation’s lifetime. Fourteen days earlier, Germany had declared war on Russia, and since then had invaded Belgium and declared war against France; in so doing, Germany became embroiled in the increasingly global conflict sparked by Austria-Hungary’s declaration of war on Serbia on 28 July 1914. Stöcker’s editorial served not only as a way of taking stock of the great transformations wrought by the outbreak of the war, but also as a justification for continued sexual knowledge production and sexual reform activism. In her editorial, Stöcker insisted that the work of “refining and elevating feeling and behavior” was needed now more than ever in this time of struggle for “naked Existence” among individuals and states. In her view, “Even during

wartime the power of cultural work cannot be extinguished.” In fact, she maintained that the opposite was true: namely, that “well-organized, peaceful, effective, and purposeful cultural work on the inside is one of the main preconditions by which the victory, which our weapons achieve on the outside, can be made truly fruitful for us.”

Stöcker’s insistence on the continued need for and relevance of the “cultural work” of sexual analysis and reform was not merely self-serving. Rather, she recognized at a very early stage the intimate interconnection between war and sex that would become increasingly apparent over the next four years.

The First World War marked an unprecedented moment in the sex lives of Europeans. Although states had long played critical roles in governing individuals’ sex lives, for example, through laws surrounding marriage, prostitution, and access to contraceptive information and technology, they had rarely intervened so directly in the private sexual sphere as they did during the war. In Germany and beyond, military and civilian authorities endeavored to discipline and harness sex in gender-specific ways that could aid (or at the very least not inhibit) the realization of strategic national goals. Much of the German state’s wartime interest in sexuality was driven by the so-called population question, which sought the best methods to increase the quantity and “quality” of the national population. Officials also demonstrated a growing concern with the state of sexual morality, and feared that a decline in sexual standards would inhibit the war effort, the stability of domestic and familial arrangements, and relations of power between the sexes after the war.

2. Ibid., 410. She reiterated such claims at the beginning of 1915, declaring, “Our work to improve the living and developmental conditions for mothers and children—married and unmarried—[and] to help create purer, deeper, sincerer (innigere) love relationships between man and woman: it has not lost its meaning for the people (Volksganze) during the war.” In fact, she insisted that the opposite was true, and that their work was more important than ever. See Helene Stöcker, “An unsere Leser!,” Die neue Generation 1 (1915): 1.

From the perspective of many sexologists and sex reformers, the war had finally brought much-desired state attention to issues they had repeatedly insisted were pressing collective concerns, above all the “population question” and sexual morality. However, the war added new dimensions to reformers and sexologists’ analyses of sexual matters, along with a new set of objectives for the transformation of sexual life following the war. Remarkably, in spite of worsening social, political, and economic conditions over the course of the war, reformers and sexologists continued to write and publish texts that grappled with the conflict’s impacts on sex and sexuality, and to advance diverse visions for postwar reform. This chapter examines how the war impacted sexology, and specifically how women sexologists analyzed the effects of the war on sexuality and sexual relations. It offers a fascinating look at how sexologists tried to make sense of the war as it was happening. By examining sexologists’ wartime texts, we can gain a sense of their prevailing anxieties at the time, along with their hopes and fears for the future. Furthermore, doing so allows us to consider a number of temporally specific questions. Did the war change the ways sexologists studied sex, and if so how? Did it provoke new analyses of sex and sexuality? And did it inspire new political demands, or even radicalize long-standing ones?

I explore these questions by analyzing texts written by Helene Stöcker, Grete Meisel-Hess, and Henriette Fürth, as well as a new author whose works began appearing in sexological journals during the war years, Mathilde Vaerting. Hailing from a large, well-off Catholic family in western Germany, Mathilde Vaerting began her career like many women of her time, as a teacher. While still working as a teacher, she earned her doctorate from the University of Bonn in 1911, after advanced study of math, physics, chemistry, philosophy, and medicine. Vaerting started working with radical educational reform movements, sex reform movements, and sexological associations including the League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform, and, unusually for a woman, the
International Society for Sexual Research, after moving to Berlin in 1913 to take up a position as an Oberlehrerin, or senior primary-school teacher. In 1923, despite the strong opposition of her male colleagues, she was appointed to the newly established academic position of professor of pedagogy (Erziehungswissenschaft) at the University of Jena; she thus became Germany’s second female university professor.

The First World War marked a significant moment in women’s sexological writing, and provides another example of the ways in which gender mattered in sexological discourse. Although women writers were concerned with many of the same issues as their male peers, and even agreed with them on certain key points, they diverged in important ways and contributed a number of unique insights and arguments. The war empowered women to advance new critiques of male sexuality and patriarchy, and to theorize the evolutionary causes of the war. It also led women to take new factors into account when analyzing sexual life and its problems. Women sexologists treated the war not only as a crisis, but also as an opportunity for rethinking and transforming sexual life. As Henriette Fürth argued, “New social and new moral values will arise and have to prevail if indeed this mightiest struggle is to be fruitful for us.” Arguably, the exigencies of the war and its uncertain resolution led women to hope that even some of their more radical moral and institutional reform demands could become realities.

The extraordinary conditions of the war proved productive both for women’s sexological analyses and for their claims making on behalf of women’s sexual and social empowerment. Yet as was the case before the war, women’s understandings and evaluations of sex were fundamentally informed—and, I argue, constrained—by

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the eugenic principles and concerns with health and productivity that animated sexological and official discourse. These concerns were only heightened by the massive loss of life over the course of the war, and by mounting concerns regarding the health of the fighting forces and the starving civilian population on the home front. The responsibility for regenerating the population and upholding sexual morality still rested on women’s shoulders, as was the case before the war; however, given the stakes involved, this burden now weighed especially heavily, and made it even harder for women sexologists to legitimize women’s rights independently of larger “racial” goals, as ends in themselves.

Not Incidental: The Role of Sex during the First World War

Although sex had long been a part of warfare, the First World War marked an unprecedented moment of state regulation of the sex lives of private individuals. This phenomenon was not particular to Germany, but extended throughout Europe and into the larger imperial world.\(^6\) Within Germany, the state introduced a range of new laws, policies, and legislative proposals between 1914 and 1918 that aimed to regulate sexuality both at the war front and on the home front. Reviewing the state’s regulatory efforts during the war helps illuminate not only the perceived importance of sexuality to the war effort and even to the fate of the nation, but also the changing social, political, and legal landscapes sexologists and reformers confronted.

Although women and men both faced thoroughgoing regulation of their sexual activity during the war, the regulations themselves

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were gender differentiated in ways that recapitulated and legally inscribed the sexual double standard. Fears regarding a high rate of venereal diseases among soldiers, in addition to gendered beliefs regarding the necessity of (hetero)sexual activity for men’s health, led the military to facilitate and regulate prostitution at the war front. The military helped arrange soldiers’ regular visits, provided them with prophylactics, and also subjected them to frequent inspections for disease. Military leaders undertook these measures not to ensure the happiness of individual soldiers, but rather in the name of military efficiency and public health. Specifically, officials believed regulated prostitution would help maintain troop morale, bolster Germany’s fighting power, and prevent the spread of venereal diseases in the civilian population.7

On the home front the long-term and often permanent separation of husbands and wives, combined with the increased presence of unaccompanied women in public as workers, volunteers, and household providers, gave rise to new measures that placed women’s sexual behavior under widespread surveillance. The state tightened its control over prostitution “at home” by broadening the definition of a prostitute to include any woman who had sex outside of marriage, regardless of whether money changed hands.8 Lisa Todd has shown that even in the early days of the war, German police “declared, in essence, that ‘acting like a prostitute’ was akin to actually being one.”9 According to Elizabeth Domansky, the effect of this change was to make it “legally admissible to report women who had several male visitors in a month’s time to the police as suspected prostitutes.” Women who were repeatedly reported could then be forced to register as prostitutes.10

9. In May 1916, the commander of the Second Army Corps declared that “any female person infected with a venereal disease could be placed under surveillance, ‘even in the event that evidence of professional prostitution is not present’”; Todd, “Sexual Treason,” 108.
Beyond these new measures aimed at suppressing prostitution, police also stepped up their surveillance of taverns, pubs, and hostess bars in order to control the supposedly loose and lewd women who pursued work and pleasure there. Local police departments attempted to force these establishments to prohibit registered women from entry, dismiss their female employees, and close by an appointed curfew.\textsuperscript{11} Women were further policed in their interactions with foreign prisoners of war. Here, the penalties for fraternization were severe: women faced imprisonment for up to one year, or a fine of up to 1,500 marks, if they had intimate encounters with the enemy.\textsuperscript{12} All of these measures aimed not just to control women’s behavior in public spaces, but to suppress all expressions of extramarital, extradomestic female sexuality and, by punishing contact with POWs, to try to safeguard national and racial purity. In so doing, the state took it upon itself to defend the institution of marriage, specifically by keeping an eye on soldiers’ sexual “property” at home, as Domansky points out.\textsuperscript{13} The state took an active role in policing the boundaries of female respectability and suppressing perceived signs of female sexual disorder.

The state’s unprecedented intervention into women’s sex lives paralleled women’s unprecedented involvement in public life. Women were mobilized in service of the total war effort through a variety of activities, including paid industrial labor, agriculture, nursing, military auxiliaries, and traditionally male civil service jobs, in addition to myriad voluntary activities. Over the course of the war, the League of German Women’s Associations introduced the National Women’s Service, which cooperated with the Ministry of the Interior to provide support for families of men fighting at the front, mobilize women for war work, and coordinate the food supply. The National Women’s Service put the women’s movement in constant contact with the government at all levels, and it advised the government on matters of welfare and women’s

\textsuperscript{11} Todd, “Sexual Treason,” 126–127.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 150–152.
\textsuperscript{13} Domansky, “Militarization and Reproduction,” 450.
labor.\textsuperscript{14} Even progressive feminists such as Henriette Fürth worked in the National Women’s Service and helped establish “war kitchens” (\textit{Kriegsküche}) and other services that supported the war effort.\textsuperscript{15} Local branches of the League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform also stepped up their provisions for unwed mothers and their children by establishing more birthing centers and advice centers and providing more beds for pregnant single mothers.\textsuperscript{16} Meanwhile, women who opposed the war effort also took on important leadership roles in the international women’s pacifist movement, a development that not only led them to articulate highly sophisticated critiques of the nation-state and visions for international governance institutions, but also served as a training ground for further political leadership positions after the war. Women involved in the suffrage movement were especially prominent in the peace movement.\textsuperscript{17} Although historians have debated the questions of whether any of these developments had long-standing, transformative implications for women’s rights and gender roles themselves, and whether the war marked a moment of emancipation for women, it seems clear that women experienced a greater degree of agency than before, even if it was constrained. As a result of their experience during the war, many women believed they had proven themselves capable of greater roles and responsibilities in the postwar polity.

In addition to measures aimed at controlling venereal disease among soldiers and policing women’s sexual behavior at home—measures that often facilitated men’s sexual opportunities while restricting women’s—the German state proposed and introduced new measures aimed at boosting national population numbers.


\textsuperscript{17} On German feminists and the peace movement, see Evans, \textit{Feminist Movement in Germany}, 214–223.
Although Germany’s birthrate had been falling since the late 1890s and had already become a subject of concern among some state officials and social reformers before the war, this issue gained in importance during the war. As Cornelie Usborne has observed, “The prospect of slaughter on the battlefields and the need for national defence meant that Volkskraft (population strength) was more than ever equated with Wehrkraft (military strength).” Discussion of and activism surrounding the population question markedly intensified during and after autumn 1915, following a breakthrough of German and Austrian forces in Russia that led many to think that victory on the Eastern Front was near, but that the nation was not ready for the task of postwar rebuilding and renewal.

To promote the birthrate, the state proposed a range of positive and punitive measures; however, many of these measures were never realized, and among those that were put into effect, punishment trumped incentive. Usborne has noted that despite the enthusiastic support of the Kaiser, state ministries, and the army—to say nothing of the fervent support expressed by certain quarters of civil society—the comprehensive system of material incentives initially envisioned by the government, which included the construction of new infant care centers, children’s hospitals, and crèches, was ultimately “reduced to small-scale measures which were often uncoordinated, contradictory, and unrealistic.” Some of the new welfare provisions that were introduced included midwifery reforms, the development of improved infant feeding practices, and enhanced training of pediatric nurses. The state also enhanced welfare provided to soldiers’ wives and families under the Law Regarding the Support of Men in Military Service (1888/1914), and

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21. Usborne, Politics of the Body, 19; see also Todd, “Sexual Treason,” 213. According to Paul Weindling, this outcome was largely the responsibility of the Finance Ministry, which withheld necessary funds. See Paul Weindling, Health, Race, and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism, 1870–1945 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 290.
even extended support to unwed mothers and their children, providing women could prove the child’s father was in active service. The extension of welfare to unwed mothers exemplifies how ideas that were considered “morally outrageous” before the war—in this case the League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform’s decade-long campaign for rights and recognition of unwed mothers and their children—became “recognized as intrinsic to the national interest,” as Paul Weindling has observed. In addition to these welfare measures, venereal disease treatment clinics began appearing in major German cities, offering another example of the moral changes effected by the war. Funded by local insurance boards, these clinics offered free advice, testing, and treatment to their clients. The first clinic had actually opened before the war, in Hamburg in January 1914, and treated 932 patients in its first year. By 1917, ninety clinics had opened nationwide.

Whereas the state’s patchy public health and welfare measures sought to incentivize reproduction, its more thoroughgoing punitive approaches endeavored to prevent contraception. Beginning in 1915, military authorities prohibited the display, advertisement, and sale of contraceptives and abortifacients—aside from condoms, which were exempted as prophylactics and primarily facilitated men’s sexual freedoms. In the following years, the Prussian Medical Council and Reich Health Council articulated guidelines to restrict doctors’ abortion practice: henceforth, only registered medical practitioners would be able to terminate pregnancies, and only in instances where the woman’s health and life were seriously threatened. Additionally, the state introduced a legal ban against the publication of the names of newlyweds to prevent contraceptive dealers from soliciting to them. In 1917, the German government tabled three bills that drastically aimed to “solve” the population problem. These bills required the mandatory treatment of VD and

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23. Ibid., 214, 218.
27. Ibid.
threatened up to three years in jail for anyone who knowingly infected others. They also prohibited the manufacture, sale, and advertising of all contraception—except, again, the condom—and outlawed abortion except under strict medical regulations. Furthermore, physicians who performed unlawful sterilizations could be sentenced to up to three years of prison time, and their patients would also be subject to criminal sanction. Although these bills passed the German parliament, they were never enacted, thanks to the November 1918 Revolution.\footnote{Usborne, \textit{Politics of the Body}, 21–23.}

Despite the comprehensiveness and potential reach of these laws, their success in realizing their objectives was mixed. Although these new measures, along with increased vigilance among policing authorities, led to an increase in prosecutions of male pharmacists and doctors, the informal, neighborhood-based, and predominately female networks that circulated contraceptive techniques were more difficult to regulate.\footnote{Todd, “Sexual Treason,” 205–207.} Moreover, public response to the suppression of abortions and contraception was divided and complicated by debates regarding the fate of children born to German mothers and foreign fathers, whether consensual or the result of force.\footnote{Ibid., 222–224.} The inadequacies of the aforementioned criminal laws, along with the public ambivalence surrounding the desirability of restricting abortion and contraceptives, illuminate the complications involved in the state’s efforts to regulate sexuality during wartime, and suggest some of the reasons why civilian sexual experts and activists may have felt emboldened to intervene with their own ideas for reform.

**Sexology during Wartime**

As the preceding section demonstrates, sex was not inconsequential or marginal to the waging of war. On the contrary, the state’s multifaceted intervention into the sexual lives of soldiers and
civilians illuminates the importance attached to sex as key to social order, military success, and national aggrandizement. From the perspective of many sexologists and reformers, the state’s willingness to take an active role in shaping private sexual lives, particularly surrounding reproduction, was a welcome change from its prewar stance. The war actually appeared to confirm sexologists’ long-standing insistence that understanding and improving sexual life were matters of critical sociopolitical, national, and racial importance.

Perusing the pages of the major sexological and sex reform journals during the First World War, the reader is immediately struck by the continuity of themes from the prewar era. During the war, writers continued to pursue their preoccupations with the spread and containment of venereal diseases, prostitution, abortion and contraception, sexual and racial hygiene, female sexuality, heterosexual unions, and sexual ethics. Yet wartime analyses of these phenomena necessarily differed from those advanced during the Wilhelmine era because the war exacerbated already troubling prewar sexual realities and created a new set of objectives for the reform of sexual life. The tone of sexological analyses also changed over the course of the war, and arguably reflected not only the unprecedented human cost of the war but also Germany’s declining fortunes.

During the first years of the war, the majority of German sexologists espoused explicitly nationalist sentiments. This development represented a break with work produced before the war, which by and large eschewed explicit nationalism and certainly profited from international collaboration; in fact, the envisioned audience of much prewar sexological work was seemingly universal. Texts written and published especially during the early years of the war reflected their authors’ desires to serve the German nation, and many male sexologists served at the front in surgical hospitals. They continued to write during their service, and the designation “zur Zeit im Felde,” or “at the moment in the field,” accompanied their bylines. The Journal for Sexual Science went so far as to advertise war loans. Notably, this early tendency toward nationalism can be found not only in the texts of male sexologists, but also in
the work of left-leaning women sexologists like Helene Stöcker. Although Stöcker had long-standing links to the German peace movement dating back to 1892, her early war writings expressed remarkable patriotism.\textsuperscript{32} In articles like “The War and Women” and “Love or Hate?” for example, she declared that the League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform was a distinctively “Germanic” movement that fought for the “healthy physical development of our people.”\textsuperscript{33} At the beginning of the war, she described women’s lack of civilian mobilization in support of the war as “shamefully deficient,” and insisted that women ought to take an active role in the war effort.\textsuperscript{34} According to Stöcker at that time, women had distinctive roles to play as caregivers, protectors of morality, and purveyors of love in the face of nationalistic hatred.\textsuperscript{35}

However, as the war dragged on and casualty rates soared, Stöcker’s horror at the slaughter of millions and her concern for the fate of cultural progress led her to adopt a defiantly pacifist stance that subsequently influenced her analyses of the war. Her position was also reflected in the leadership roles she assumed within new, uncompromising pacifist organizations such as the League for a New Fatherland. Over the course of 1915, her attitude toward the war became unambiguously critical. In her article “Sex Psychology and War,” she wrote that one of the few good side effects of the war were “the gains in psychological clarity and insight” it provided, specifically concerning the true nature of “civilized peoples” (\textit{Kulturmenschen}).\textsuperscript{36} Increasingly, Stöcker believed that the


\textsuperscript{33} According to Stöcker, the fact that the league’s practical endeavors to improve biological and social conditions were inextricably connected with an intellectual, idealistic movement was what made the league so “eminently German” and gave it a very “Germanic character.” Helene Stöcker, “Liebe oder Hassen?,” \textit{Die neue Generation} 12 (1914): 531–532.


\textsuperscript{35} Stöcker, “Liebe oder Hassen?,” 545–546.

\textsuperscript{36} Helene Stöcker, “Geschlechtspsychologie und Krieg,” \textit{Die neue Generation} 1 (1915): 287. In 1917, Stöcker asserted that “we have learned more about human psychology during the last three years than we knew thirty years ago”; Stöcker, “Gewalt oder Verständigung,” \textit{Die neue Generation} 5 (1917): 200.
so-called civilized nations had really not evolved at all, and that the evolution of progress enjoyed by civilized people was only technical and superficial. 37 The war proved to Stöcker that “primitive” tendencies lay just under the surface, and that one had “only to scratch—and the barbarian is revealed.” 38

By 1916, Stöcker’s pacifism and commitment to cosmopolitanism became unmistakable and enmeshed with her views on gender, sexuality, and civilization. She ultimately came to see the goals of the protection of mothers, sexual reform, and pacifism as interconnected. In her article “Hatred of Other Peoples and the Press,” she observed, “Before the war we fought for a refinement of sexual morals, against the double standard in the relationship of the sexes. Since the war started, we have had to recognize that a double moral standard also exists beyond sexual life, that is, wherever force seeks to replace the rule of law.” 39 Stöcker came to view the “double standard” as a feature not just of sexual life, but of social and even geopolitical life, and that the further evolution of culture was impossible without a fight against the ideology justifying war. 40 She was adamant in her belief that “a human being is not just a means, but an end in itself at any time.” 41 Aside from such universalist principles, Stöcker’s maternalist views also influenced her pacifism. Although she did not believe that women were innately pacifistic, she did maintain that women were more inclined toward peace. In her article “Sex Psychology and War,” she argued that women ought to recognize how “senseless and suicidal for women” (sinnlos und selbstmörderisch für Frauen) it is to support a worldview that placed power and violence (Gewalt) above Right (Recht), given that such systems tended to operate against women’s interests and their investments in the creation, rather than the destruction, of life. 42

39. Ibid., 87.
42. Stöcker, “Geschlechtspsychologie und Krieg,” 293.
As a consequence of her pacifism, Stöcker abandoned her erstwhile nationalism in favor of appeals to a seemingly universal humanity, and became a vocal critic of both the German state and even the very concept of the state itself. In her 1916 article, “Humanity”—a term that began to appear in sex reform journals over the course of the First World War—Stöcker characterized war as “the triumph of a state in its original form: [namely, as] an organization of power.”

Stöcker repeatedly called upon all states to stop treating their citizens as “the fertilizer of civilization” (Kulturdünger), and instead treat them as “the carriers of culture” (Kulturträger). This shift in perspective, she insisted, would inhibit states from sacrificing their highest wealth: healthy, highly developed humans. However, Stöcker’s pacifism and criticism of the state placed her in conflict with the majority of the League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform’s membership.

Similarly, at the beginning of the war, left-leaning sexologist and homosexual rights activist Magnus Hirschfeld displayed a surprising degree of nationalist fervor. He counseled gay men and women who wished to serve in the military on how to pass as straight, and encouraged them to send him reports of their heroism so they could be published in the Quarterly Reports of the Scientific Humanitarian Committee. Hirschfeld believed that such evidence would not only prove gay men and women’s much-doubted courage and patriotism, but also secure a sense of belonging in the nation and perhaps even support for their political demands.

What biographer Elena Mancini refers to as the apogee of Hirschfeld’s “naïve patriotism” came with the 1915 publication of his pamphlet, “Why Do Other Nations Hate Us?” in which he asserted that Germany’s

44. Stöcker, “Moderne Bevölkerungspolitik,” 86.
45. Nowacki, Der Bund für Mutterschutz, 83, 86.
47. Ibid. Note Mancini’s citation of Charlotte Wolff’s observation that Hirschfeld’s nationalism could have been a strategic response to antisemitism (Magnus Hirschfeld, 112); however, it could have equally been a strategic response to the opportunity to advance LGBT rights.
enemies were envious of its desirable social, economic, and political conditions and fearful of its geopolitical potential. It was not until Hirschfeld served as a Red Cross inspector at the war front in 1916 that he adopted an unwavering, unapologetic pacifist stance in response to the horrors he witnessed. Thereafter Hirschfeld became a member of the League for a New Fatherland.

As Stöcker and Hirschfeld’s commitments to pacifism intimate, the war shook both male and female sexologists’ faith in the beneficial outcomes of evolution, specifically in the idea that human evolution would inevitably lead to progressive improvements in sexual, social, and political life. Most sexologists believed that the war represented a kind of mass atavism, marking the triumph of primal urges and bloodlust over moderation, restraint, and reason. Although some naively believed early on that the war would have positive evolutionary effects, such hopes faded quickly as the war took its crushing toll, and such beliefs were instead replaced by the view that the war represented a major setback for human progress. Some sexologists saw the war as causing an active regression of humanity, including among supposedly civilized Europeans. The range of phenomena taken as symptomatic of degeneration highlights the fact that the diagnosis of war as atavism cut across political ideologies. Among the signs of degeneration male and female sexologists identified were women’s abandonment of sexual ethics and “honor” on the home front; the sexual violence inflicted upon civilians by invading armies; the awakening of primitive bloodlust and erotic instincts on the battlefield; and reports of interracial relationships between white women and colonial soldiers on European soil. Regarding the latter point, physician Ike Spier characterized the attraction of “certain women to foreign, exotic men, colored soldiers, prisoners of war” as an “atavistic phenomenon” that represented a “relapse” into “the primeval times of spousal choice, where the most striking,

48. Mancini, Magnus Hirschfeld, 112.
49. Ibid.
strongest, most bizarre, most full of sexual secrets and most promising [mates] were chosen.”

Intriguingly (and somewhat dishearteningly), instead of making European sexologists more circumspect about their place on the evolutionary scale, the war made many more insistent on preserving their assumed place at the top, and more concerned with supposedly race-based group differences. Sexologists’ belief that civilization itself was under threat (civilization of course being a condition they thought had been realized only by Europeans) made them fearful of a lapse into barbarity on the Continent, which in turn would facilitate the triumph of other, supposedly inferior races as hegemonic geopolitical forces. In fact, this perceived need to defend and safeguard civilization—or rather, European supremacy—fueled some sexologists’ pacifist positions.

These tendencies are evident in August Forel’s pacifist treatise, *The United States of Earth* (1914). Here the reader confronts critical analyses of, among other topics, geopolitics, international political economy, and nationalism as an ideology and psychological phenomenon. However, woven through these concerns are various kinds of racial anxieties that betray their author’s overt cosmopolitan orientation. In *The United States of Earth*, Forel insisted that peace could only be achieved through the cultural and social disciplining of the “predator instinct” that lay dormant within all humans. Although he maintained that “culture cannot change humanity’s inherited nature,” he nonetheless believed that “humans can, through appropriate upbringing, be brought to experience social sentiments, perform social work, be frugal and disciplined, that is to say, can more or less be made to conform to social duties.” Yet at the same time, Forel also maintained that a necessary precondition for taming primal, aggressive human instincts was the achievement of a certain cultural status, one that he believed only Europeans had achieved. Forel clarified that the pacifist

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program for a “United States of the Earth” was only to be applied to “civilized nations” (Kulturnationen); according to him, “Only an international agreement among all cultured nations on fair arrangements can thwart that danger [of war]; the end of the present war will offer a unique opportunity to achieve this end.”\(^53\) Aside from China, which Forel believed was “once again becoming a cultured nation,” he maintained that “the rest of the barbaric or wild people barely come into consideration.”\(^54\) Moreover, Forel’s insistence on the necessity of attaining a certain level of cultural evolution as a precondition for peace led him to justify the maintenance of colonies within his envisioned “United States of the Earth.” Although he opined that it was difficult to know which groups could be taught the rudiments of culture, he nonetheless believed that certain races could only be “tamed” and taught to externally adapt “our culture” as long as they remained under the dominance of a higher race, lest they fall back into “sad barbarism.”\(^55\) In his view, “Our goal must be to make people everywhere happier by freeing them from barbarism and by ensuring at the same time their enjoyment of freedom to a degree that they can bear without jeopardizing the outstanding social value of all humanity.”\(^56\) According to Forel, those peoples that could not (or would not) adopt the standards of (European) culture would ultimately go extinct. He insisted that it was merely a fact of evolution that “the uncivilized people die out; culture rapidly conquers the rest of the world.”\(^57\) Similar attitudes toward race, peace, and civilization could be found in the writings of sexologists beyond German-speaking Europe, most notably in the work of Havelock Ellis.\(^58\)

In addition to viewing the war as a major step backward for human progress, male and female sexologists also viewed the war as

\(^53\) Ibid., 9.  
\(^54\) Ibid.  
\(^55\) Ibid., 16, 20.  
\(^56\) Ibid., 20.  
\(^57\) Ibid., 7.  
highly dysgenic. Sexologists invested in racial hygiene warned that both the functional and the nervous sexual problems that afflicted some soldiers, such as impotence and the increasing spread of venereal diseases, were threatening men’s fertility and potentially damaging the health and well-being of their wives and future children.\(^59\) Moreover, they feared that instead of weeding out weaker men as previous wars had supposedly done, the indiscriminate and wide-ranging destruction of modern, technological warfare was exercising a disastrous eugenic counterselection by decimating even the fittest of soldiers. Many decried the massive loss of what was often referred to as blossoming life, and feared the demographic consequences of losing so many healthy men at the front. Sexologists foresaw a range of disastrous knock-on effects that would follow this loss of life. First, they noted the obvious: namely, that the war had dealt a disastrous blow to population numbers, which would take some time to recover. This effect was notably less worrying to eugenically inclined sexologists than to the pronatalist state: in fact, many sexologists maintained that a falling birthrate was a sign of higher evolution.\(^60\) Second, sexologists argued that the war’s high death toll would exacerbate the prewar demographic imbalance between men and women; specifically, it would increase the numbers of so-called surplus women of marriageable age who would not be able to find husbands. Third, sexologists prophesied that the war’s impact on the population would give an unnatural and detrimental advantage to unfit men on the marriage market; that is, they worried that men afflicted with diseases or disabled by the war would, in the absence of fitter and more desirable male rivals, be able to reproduce, with supposedly disastrous results for future generations.\(^61\)


\(^{60}\) For example, see Eduard David, “Der Krieg und das Bevölkerungsproblem,” \textit{Die neue Generation} 11 (November 1914): 469–480.

In order to mitigate the war’s dysgenic effects, sexologists advocated a range of reforms. Those who subscribed to a conservative interpretation of eugenics and racial hygiene continued their push for various invasive and prohibitive measures, including marriage restrictions on the “unfit,” sterilization for those individuals deemed less valuable, and longer prison terms for convicted criminals. Additionally, they advocated ideological and cultural campaigns to shift public attitudes and thereby mold behavior. To this end, they encouraged both the social celebration of “child-rich” healthy families and the adoption of an attitude of sexual “revulsion toward less valuable races.”

Conversely, sexologist Hermann Rohleder and social democrat Eduard David stressed the importance of fostering better life chances among those children already alive. They therefore stressed the need to reduce the infant mortality rate and create better and healthier living conditions for the majority of people. As we will see, many of their proposals resembled those put forward before the war by writers like Grete Meisel-Hess. According to Eduard David, the population question would only be resolved if “better conditions of existence” were realized “for the masses: adequate food and nutrition, healthy homes, a reduction in working time, security against threats to health and accidents, and special protections for women, youth, and children—in short, the whole wide field of economic and social policy, focused to elevate the poorer social classes.”

Both David and Rohleder called for the development of a comprehensive program of mother and child protection and the introduction of science-based sexual education in schools. Likewise, they insisted on the need to eliminate the social and material obstacles that prevented many men and women from marrying and starting a family, and advocated incentives such as an increase in civil servants’ salaries and a reduction in compulsory military service for married men. Rohleder further insisted on the need to

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“energetically fight venereal diseases . . . criminal abortions . . . [and] alcoholism,” “remove the imposed celibacy rule on Catholic priests and female civil servants,” and “restrict emigration.”

These reforms were justified not only on humanitarian grounds, but on political-economic ones as well, specifically on appeals to national efficiency and productive potential. Rohleder and David both invoked Austrian sociologist Rudolf Goldscheid’s influential concept of “human economy” (Menschenökonomie), which represented healthy human life as a form of foundational capital for the entire economy. Yet even these more environmentally oriented authors advocated sterilization among “people who are unfit for life, incurable, mentally ill, criminal, etc. just like in North America,” where states such as Indiana (1907) and California (1909) had passed some of the world’s first compulsory sterilization laws.

Finally, male and female sexologists alike preoccupied themselves with the sexual-ethical consequences of the war. Many believed that the combination of long-term spousal separation and newfound sexual freedoms threatened not merely the institution of marriage, but the practice and value of monogamy itself. In particular, many male sexologists feared that as a result of their wartime freedoms, women would become less interested in marriage and lose their commitment to an ideal of monogamy. Sexologists also warned that the war was depressing the very will to have children on the part of both genders. Although most sexologists agreed that sexual morals and values were declining, they disagreed—notably along gendered lines—on who was ultimately to blame for these developments. Many male sexologists maintained that women’s promiscuity was responsible for wartime sexual degeneration. They attributed women’s increased promiscuity to psychological

65. Ibid., 21.
causes, such as newfound female sexual pathologies like "uniform feti

Shism" (Uniformfetischismus). Some even blamed the very

nature of female sexual physiology itself. The latter is best exem-

plified by gynecologist E. Heinrich Kisch’s notorious 1917 publi-

cation, *The Sexual Unfaithfulness of Women*, which asserted that

women’s promiscuity stemmed from their weak and suggestible

sex drive.67 Even if women’s sexual behavior was attributable to

biology or psychology, male sexologists nonetheless held “careless

girls and women” responsible for seducing soldiers and spreading

venereal diseases.68 During the first months of the war, the journal

*Sexual Problems* went so far as to publish reports of “undignified

women” (*würdelose Weiber*) who intimately associated with pris-

oners of war.69 As we will see, women sexologists offered notably
different interpretations of the causes and perpetrators of the war’s

sexual ills.

The Difference Gender Made: Women, War, and Sexology

Although women’s wartime sexual analyses largely constellated

around the same set of issues that preoccupied their male col-

leagues, they diverged in significant ways that had everything to
do with gender. Despite sharing common concerns about the war’s
impact on sexual morality, sexual relations, and population health
and numbers, women sexologists offered unique analyses of the
causes of these sexual problems and put forward different solu-
tions. They rejected their male colleagues’ efforts to blame women
for wartime sexual degeneracy by offering sensitive portrayals

67. E. Heinrich Kisch, *Die sexuelle Untreue der Frau* (Bonn: A. Marcus and E.

Webers Verlag, 1917).

68. See “Varia: Die ‘Deutsche Gesellschaft zur Bekämpfung der Geschlechts-

krankheiten’ hat das folgende Merkblatt für Soldaten unter den ins Feld ziehen-
den Soldaten verbreiten lassen,” *Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft* 1 (November

69. See, for example, “Würdelose Weiber” and “Noch mehr würdelose Weiber,” *Sexual-Probleme* 10 (Sept. 1914): 619.
of women’s intimate wartime experiences and holding men accountable for their own sexual excesses. They also offered alternative perspectives on the population question that pushed back against pronatalist demands. The extent and threat of the war arguably emboldened some women writers to insist on reforms to laws, morals, and institutions that had found only limited expression and acceptance before 1914, and even to put forward radical new solutions that aimed to empower women specifically by giving them greater control over their fertility. That is, they aimed to empower certain women: eugenics continued to infuse women sexologists’ analyses and prescriptions. Although their eugenic investments arguably make strategic sense in light of the intensification of biopolitical anxieties during the war, the presence of eugenics in their analyses had the same familiar inhibiting implications for the scope and purchase of their ideas as it had before the war.

As mentioned earlier, women sexologists shared common anxieties with their male peers; however, they frequently understood these problems differently. They not only highlighted different underlying causes for, and aspects of, these sexual problems, but also drew attention to the different impacts they had on women. Moreover, they asserted authority over certain subjects that they claimed were of greater importance to women. Mathilde Vaerting for one declared that women had more reason to care, and more authority to comment upon, the population question because they were the ones who were primarily responsible for the “higher breeding of humanity,” and would be most affected by the lack of men (Männermangel) following the war.70 Certainly, subjects such as sexual ethics and heterosexual relations were not new to female sexual theorists, but the conditions of war exacerbated old problems, created new ones, and undoubtedly heightened the sense of urgency many women sexologists felt in their need to understand and remedy conditions they viewed as harmful to the community and especially to women.

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70. Vaerting went so far as to call women the “eugenic rulers of humanity” (Eugeniker des Menschengeschlechts); Prof. Dr. M. T. Vaerting, “Die Frau, die erblich-organische Höherentwicklung und der Krieg,” Die neue Generation 3/4 (March/April 1916): 68.
While they generally agreed that moral conditions were devolving and relations between men and women were deteriorating, women sexologists vehemently resisted male sexologists’ assertions that women were primarily responsible for causing these conditions. Even when they were critical of some women’s “irresponsible” and “immoral” sexual behavior during the war, women sexologists sought to understand the causes of such behavior. For her part, Grete Meisel-Hess argued that the war had increased women’s sexual needs and intimate suffering by removing their husbands and partners.  


72. Ibid., 160.

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid., 164.
that Meisel-Hess’s enthusiasm for women’s sexual freedom was always undergirded by a profound commitment to monogamy, and by her insistence upon an ethic of “racial responsibility” as a lode-star guiding sexual behavior. The perceived indiscriminate promiscuity of her female contemporaries was something she would not countenance.

Although writers like Meisel-Hess could prove judgmental regarding the changes happening in female sexuality, they were also quick to point out the fact that if sexual morality was declining, women alone were not responsible: men were just as much to blame. An important focus in women’s wartime sexology was the war’s negative impact on male sexuality. According to Meisel-Hess, the war unleashed and allowed men to succumb to the “hunger of an atavistic wild sexuality” that lay within all men, from “the leadings lights of society to its simple members.” Likewise, Helene Stöcker maintained that the war had strengthened men’s deeply rooted, primitive instincts, desires, and drives. For Stöcker, the destructiveness of the war had once and for all undermined the claim that reason and objectivity were exclusively masculine qualities: “The collapse of those powers, which one had hoped might de-escalate the war if not prevent it entirely:—the Christian world view, the socialist International, the ‘Republic of Letters’ of intellectuals from all nations—means for us women the collapse of our faith in the supposedly higher development of masculine objectivity, which we women had to strive towards if we were able to reach the heights of pure science (Wissenschaft). . . . Man should, after this experience, be a little more cautious and modest in his disparaging judgment about woman’s lack of objectivity.” According to her, men’s propensity for war proved that irrational instincts, drives, and desires are stronger in men than their logic, rationality, and wisdom.

In Stöcker’s view the war was not just deteriorating men and women’s sexualities, but was regressing gender relations by sanctioning

75. Ibid., 162.
78. Ibid., 290.
misogyny. From the earliest days of the war, Stöcker exhibited a keen awareness of how the war made manifest pernicious attitudes toward women. These tendencies were abundantly clear, she maintained, in the public abuse of German women who exhibited kindness toward prisoners of war by bringing them chocolate and flowers. In Stöcker’s view, such attacks were motivated not by patriotism but rather by a deep-seated hatred of women. The same men who spat in these women’s faces were the very same prewar antifeminists who attacked the women’s movement, she claimed—only now, they enjoyed even greater license and legitimacy. 79 Stöcker later connected the rise in misogyny leading up to and during the war to the rise of nationalism and patriotism, writing, “We therefore had to sadly note from the beginning of the war, how the old injustices, misrepresentations and prejudices have banded together with the current stirred-up nationalistic feelings against women.” 80 Here she made connections between militarism, nationalism, and misogyny and framed them as products of innate masculine aggression, attributable to men’s evolutionary development, specifically their “millennia of fighting for survival.” 81 In her view, war represented “the strongest expression of the masculine principle of power (Herrschaftsprinzip) in the world.” 82 In this time of war, which stirred up “primitive passions,” it was not surprising to her that these old regressive instincts came to the fore. 83 In Stöcker’s view, “It is naturally no accident that in this moment, when atavistic, animalistic instincts have been awoken . . . that a loss of sexual inhibitions has emerged among all people, and is accompanied by a deep degradation of woman. To speak of a reform of sexual ethics is laughable in this moment, when the primitive precondition of every moral—Thou shalt not kill!—is not yet obeyed.” 84

Beyond manifesting explicit misogyny, Stöcker maintained that the public’s negative reaction to German women’s compassion for prisoners of war exemplified the persistence of the sexual double

82. Ibid., 288.
standard, which found new expressions during the war. To make this case, she contrasted the penalization of any contact between German women and prisoners of war with the state’s sanction and even facilitation of sexual relations between German soldiers and foreign sex workers at the front. In an article entitled “The Sexual Double Standard in the War,” Stöcker critically observed that “while brothels are being established for soldiers in enemy territories and relationships with female members of ‘our enemies’ are met with hardly any disapproval, to the extent that a discussion has started about providing financial state support to ‘war children’ who are the result of these relationships, women continuously receive jail sentences or are being threatened who only have friendly contact with war prisoners.” She pointed out that the temporary pleasures soldiers enjoyed during their brothel visits posed a greater public health and military risk than women’s potential romantic relationships with prisoners of war. Indeed, she stressed that soldiers’ state-sanctioned visits to prostitutes came at the expense of women at home, as such behavior rendered men vulnerable to venereal disease, which they could then pass along to their wives and future children. To further stress the hypocrisy inherent in the public’s negative reaction to German women’s involvements with foreign prisoners of war, Stöcker pointed out that during times of peace, relations between German women and other European men were never a matter of concern or condemnation.

To remedy wartime damages to sexual morality and sexual relations, women writers put forward an array of solutions. As we will see, many of the solutions proposed were actually demands they had made before the war, such as their call for an end to the prohibition on marriage for female civil servants, a comprehensive system of maternal welfare protections that did not discriminate against unwed mothers and so-called illegitimate children, and a sweeping overhaul of the ethics and practices of heterosexual

88. Ibid., 232, 237.
monogamy.\textsuperscript{89} They also supported some of the newly established public health institutions that they believed would help improve relations between men and women. As a longtime member of the German Society for the Fight against Venereal Diseases, Henriette Fürth voiced her support for the venereal disease advice and counseling clinics established during the war. In Fürth’s view, the clinics would provide for the “timely detection, [and] early, thorough and continued treatment” of diseases that would be necessary after soldiers returned from the war.\textsuperscript{90} She declared that these new clinics should combine medical, educational, social, and economic approaches in order to get at the root causes of the spread of venereal diseases; however, she further insisted that, in order for the clinics to work, people must be ready to speak about these diseases publicly, openly, and free from judgment and bias.\textsuperscript{91} Above all, she insisted that women must understand and forgive their partners for any wartime sexual indiscretions to help mitigate the shame associated with venereal disease infection. To this end, Fürth encouraged women to be empathetic, and consider men’s suffering at the front. Men could not be blamed for seeking temporary sexual pleasure in a situation where they faced the constant threat of death and experienced unrelenting nervous tension in the face of this reality, she insisted: “In the rest between battles, inhibitions fall away, a thirst for life grows, and he grasps at whatever he can get from this life.”\textsuperscript{92} Instead of condemning their partners, Fürth enjoined women to pursue facts about venereal diseases as a means of preventing their spread throughout the family and the broader population.\textsuperscript{93} Curiously, she did not make similar demands upon men to forgive their female partners’ extramarital relations.


\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 70.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 76.

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 76–77.
In addition to institution building, many women advocated institutional reform, specifically marriage reform. Fürth reiterated feminists’ prewar demand that female civil servants be allowed to marry and that the state legally recognize and support illegitimate children and their single mothers; however, like Hermann Rohleder, she now hinted at the possibility of allowing healthy military officers and even Catholic clergy to marry as a means of replenishing the postwar population, questioning what spiritual rule absolutely prevented priests from marrying.\textsuperscript{94} To make marriage more attractive and materially possible, Fürth also advocated greater acceptance of women’s work outside the home across all classes, and equal pay for women’s work; to raise the birthrate, she supported an expansion of welfare provisions, including the introduction of state child support, child care, rental subsidies for civil servants with large families, free schooling, school meals, and financing for home building.\textsuperscript{95} In addition to facilitating marriage, Fürth maintained that these measures would help strengthen men and women’s “will to reproduce,” and would thereby quantitatively and qualitatively enhance the population.\textsuperscript{96}

Mathilde Vaerting went even further in her marriage reform proposals: across a number of different articles and publications she insisted that, in the name of population growth and improvement, older women ought to marry younger men, space births two and a half years apart, and have no more than five children.\textsuperscript{97} She insisted that her prescribed pairings would produce highly valuable hereditary variations, and pointed to evidence that indicated most philosophical, scientific, and artistic geniuses were the offspring of younger fathers.\textsuperscript{98} Notably absent from the rationale she provided

\textsuperscript{94} Fürth, “Der Krieg und die Bevölkerungsfrage,” 195.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 198–199.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 201.
\textsuperscript{97} See Buschan, “Bücherbesprechungen: M. Vaerting, Wie ersetzt Deutschland am schnellsten die Kriegsverluste durch gesunden Nachwuchs?,” Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft 2 (1916): 435. Interestingly, because the author was stated as M. Vaerting, the reviewer assumed it was a man. His review of Vaerting’s proposals was positive.
\textsuperscript{98} Vaerting, “Die Frau,” 69.
was the feminist argument in favor of such an arrangement: after all, reversing the custom of older men marrying younger women could alter relations of power between husband and wife. To facilitate her envisioned marital reforms, Vaerting called on the state to improve wages and salaries for young men, provide state subsidies for marriage (Heiratszuschuss) funded by taxes levied on bachelors, and reduce the length of military service for married men. She recommended that young men marry ideally at age seventeen, women at age twenty. Furthermore, she declared that women had a “eugenic duty” to give male youths priority in the “production” of their children, “just like the first mothers (Urmütter),” even though it may be “very difficult for women who have become degenerated by a desire for money and social status.” Finally, Vaerting counseled women to delay marriage in order to allow their sexuality and bodies to come to full maturity for the benefit of their future children.

As Fürth’s and Vaerting’s rationales for their proposed marriage reforms suggest, women sexologists were deeply invested in the population question. Like their male peers, they urgently sought to understand its causes and consequences, and to propose workable remedies to enhance population quality and quantity. However, their analyses of the population question stemmed not only from their eugenic commitments, but also from their gendered standpoint and feminist commitments. As a result of the latter, they highlighted concerns particularly germane to women. For example, both Mathilde Vaerting and Henriette Fürth drew attention to the war’s negative effects on the sex ratio, particularly for young women at the age of peak fertility. Both authors warned that a number of women would be forced to marry men rendered unfit for marriage as a result of disability or disease, while still other women would be precluded from marrying at all. They also

worried that the postwar shortage of men would not only reduce the number of desirable marriage partners and the range of positive hereditary variations within the population, but also hamper the life choices and survival possibilities available to women.

Beyond marital prospects, writers like Fürth and Vaerting feared that a sexual imbalance would inhibit “the legitimate fulfillment of [women’s] sexual desires”—a goal that women sexologists had long deemed a “biological right.”

Lacking a “legitimate” outlet, Vaerting and Grete Meisel-Hess feared that women’s sexual needs, when confronted with the lack of marriageable men, would ultimately lead them to abandon monogamy.

Vaerting went further and predicted that the surplus of women after the war would ultimately invert heterosexual courtship rituals and thereby endanger the population. How she made this connection, and why it provoked racial anxiety, require some unpacking here. As Vaerting pointed out, a surplus of sexually mature women would mean that there would not be enough men for every woman. This imbalance would undermine monogamy, she asserted, and would also contribute to the spread of venereal diseases. Even though many women would be unable to marry, they would not remain celibate: according to Vaerting, “The sex drive is the strongest human drive and propels women with an elemental force to seek its satisfaction. It is therefore natural that these sexually unprovided-for women (geschlechtlich unversorgten Frauen), especially when their sexual desires are at their peak and their prospects for marriage in light of the lack of men look bleak, take for themselves whatever they can get” (“Die rassenhygienischen Gefahren,” 399). When women become less selective and less monogamous in the search for sexual satisfaction—that is, when they engage in what Vaerting called “secret prostitution”—they help accelerate the spread of venereal diseases. Vaerting insisted that her dire postwar prophecy was all the more likely in light of the war’s impact on sexual ethics and

relationships: “The ground for such random sexual encounters is especially favorable as a result of the long-term separation of the sexes during the war, which loosened the requirement of monogamy for both sexes” (399). Beyond “secret prostitution,” Vaerting also warned of an increase in “official prostitution” after the war, as economic conditions would force more women to sell sex to survive (399–400).

If women constituted the majority of the population, Vaerting claimed, they would become sexual aggressors, and thereby displace men from their role as the “competing element in sexual love” (400–401). Obliquely referencing sexual selection, she asserted that it was eugenically necessary for men to be the active force in sexual relations to ensure that women were brought to the “highest level of their lust, orgasm”: according to Vaerting, a child conceived without a woman experiencing orgasm would be severely damaged (401). She further insisted that men should be numerically greater in the population and maintain their leading role in courtship in view of their sexual shortcomings when it came to women’s satisfaction. “A man can barely satisfy at most one woman,” Vaerting bluntly asserted. “However, a woman can easily satisfy many men. Prostitution is a powerful, if also disgusting piece of evidence for this fact” (401). If men were forced to satisfy too many women, it would heavily damage his vital “life powers,” and ultimately degrade the race by producing ever-weaker offspring (401–402). In the name of sexual economy and eugenics, Vaerting maintained that the gender with the lowest sexual capacity must constitute the majority.

Another obvious difference between women sexologists and their male peers vis-à-vis the population question lay in women’s thorough rejection of pronatalist demands, which they recognized fell squarely on women’s shoulders. 104 Questions of reproductive

104. Mathilde Vaerting intimated that pronatalism was an inherently masculine ideology, one that derived from the nature of the male reproductive process: men’s desire for large numbers of children supposedly sprang from their mass production of semen. (Conversely, women’s supposedly innate inclination toward eugenic selection stemmed, Vaerting claimed, from the relative rarity of their ova.) See Vaerting, “Die Frau,” 71–73, esp. 73.
rights and justice therefore constituted, as before, a major fault line between male and female sexologists. Although women sexologists believed in the need to regenerate Germany with “high-quality” individuals, they nonetheless vehemently resisted the pressure put on women to bear as many children as possible. Both Meisel-Hess and Stöcker took issue with their male colleagues like social hygienist Alfred Grotjahn, who insisted that it was women’s duty to the fatherland to bear at least four children. In Stöcker’s view, Grotjahn did not “consider to give the appropriate rights to a woman who becomes aware of her considerable power to be able to either bear children for the state or not. But when one assesses the psychology of human beings correctly, one recognizes that relatively few children enter this world out of consideration for the duties which one owes to the state and even less out of considering that one will supply a lot of cannon fodder for the next war.” Stöcker argued that empowering women through legal access to safe contraception, material support in the form of maternal insurance, and legal and social recognition of illegitimate children and their mothers would have a more positive effect on the population than forcing them to have children through appeals to patriotic duty, or threats of criminal sanction: “To make women into healthy, strong, respected personalities, fully conscious of their special purpose . . . appears to me to be a much more effective way of encouraging a woman to bear multiple children (mehrfacher Mutterschaft), as opposed to legally forced reproduction (polizeilich verfügte Gebärzwang).” Stöcker’s argument points toward one of the major insights that distinguished women sexologists from their male colleagues: they stressed above all that women should want to have children. Somewhat surprisingly, it was Grete Meisel-Hess

105. Stöcker, “Moderne Bevölkerungsreform,” 80; Meisel-Hess also criticized Grotjahn’s proposal, writing, “These demands, which bring the most private aspect of an individual’s life under a tyrannical imperative, and which require not only a general passivity in the interest of the species, but also a general activity, require barely any commentary”; Meisel-Hess, Das Wesen der Geschlechtlichkeit, 122.


107. Ibid., 82.
who cleverly and tersely observed that “no one will have . . . a child only because ‘the race’ wants one.”¹⁰⁸

To combat pronatalist thinking, women sexologists insisted that the population question should not focus exclusively on the birthrate itself because that number, out of context, was misleading. Instead, they argued that in order to get an overall sense of the population size and replacement needs, the falling birthrate must be understood in relation to the falling infant death rate.¹⁰⁹ Henriette Fürth insisted that a lower birthrate and smaller population were signs of evolutionary progress, and favorably compared the virtues of a smaller Germany to its enemy, the behemoth Russia, to prove this point. While some women acknowledged an immediate need for an increase in sheer numbers, they nonetheless asked, as Fürth put it, “What are numbers, if value does not stand behind them?”¹¹⁰

Fürth’s pointed question not only illustrates once again the persistence of eugenics in informing women’s wartime sexual theorizing, but also suggests some of the analytical and rhetorical work eugenics did for women sexologists. As her comments indicate, eugenic logics could helpfully combat pronatalist demands on women: by stressing quality over quantity, they could support arguments to limit fertility, specifically in ways that placed reproductive decision making in women’s hands. The war also tested and demonstrated the malleability of eugenic arguments, and their ability to be reconciled with other discourses, including those of political economy and reproductive rights.

This observation certainly holds true for Grete Meisel-Hess, who more than anyone else in this book has illuminated eugenics’ polyvalent potential for feminist sexual theorizing. This polyvalence is further illuminated by her wartime study, The Nature of Sexuality (1916), which sought to document and account for the changes happening to sexuality as a result of the war. In The

¹⁰⁸ Meisel-Hess, Das Wesen der Geschlechtlichkeit, 139.
¹¹⁰ Fürth, “Der Krieg und die Bevölkerungsfrage,” 204.
Nature of Sexuality, Meisel-Hess dedicated particular attention to the population question and its solution. Like progressive eugenicists Eduard David and Hermann Rohleder, she insisted that the population would not experience any increase in either quantity or quality until living conditions for the majority had improved. Unlike David and Rohleder, she offered a detailed analysis of why this was the case. Building upon but departing somewhat from the analysis of sexual life she had elaborated before the war in texts like The Sexual Crisis, Meisel-Hess argued that the population question was inextricable from what she called the Nahrungsproblem, namely, the inability to secure the material necessaries of life. In this way, she was able to argue that the sexual crisis, the social crisis, and the war all shared a common root. Meisel-Hess explicitly held capitalism responsible for creating social, political, and economic conditions that made an “unbounded increase in the population size” (unbegrenzter Volksvermehrung) undesirable. As a result of the “banditry” (Banditismus) of the capitalist state, she argued that most men and women confronted a restricted “social scope of securing the necessities of life” (soziale Nahrungsspielraum), which meant that

in Germany, as in all other European states, there is now a high number of people who are not being fed because they cannot find sufficient, well-paid, permanent and regular work under the current economic principles. They have therefore no other choice but to either suppress their descendants or let them die an early death and are damned to what [Rudolf] Goldscheid accurately calls “sterile fertility.” (90–91)

As Meisel-Hess pointed out, individuals restrict their fertility in response to their economic capacity: “A man in the civilized world remains indeed to a high degree unmarried, because he quite often cannot support a wife and her children . . . at least in those years which are most beneficial and appropriate for procreation” (84). Conditions within capitalist states thus contributed to unfavorable living conditions for their populations (98).

111. Meisel-Hess, Das Wesen der Geschlechtlichkeit, xxviii. Subsequent citations from this work appear parenthetically in the text.
The *Nahrungsfrage* Meisel-Hess identified had long preceded the war—in her view, it was responsible for *causing* the war. The struggle for the necessities of life was, in her view, an obvious consequence of capitalist exploitation that ultimately resulted in a race for empire, and consequently led to global conflict. “When people are being chased beyond their borders” as a result of a lack of work, she argued, “then an effort has to be made to acquire colonies ruthlessly, resulting in a struggle for the supremacy over the oceans and finally to war” (87). Meisel-Hess maintained that this war would not have happened if economically just conditions had prevailed: “Unjust wars arise from the legitimate dissatisfaction of people. . . . Nations whose populations do not lack the most fundamental needs . . . will not start wars anymore” (94; emphasis in original). In light of her materialist diagnosis of the conjoined causes of war and sexual problems, Meisel-Hess vehemently opposed calls for an “unrestricted increase in population” to replace those lost in the war; she even prophesied that “a rush to an excessive increase in population would . . . most likely result in the next generation engaging in a world war” (87).

As a result of the war experience and her more explicitly materialist analysis of the population question, Meisel-Hess overcame some of her earlier ambivalence regarding contraceptives, and in *The Nature of Sexuality* she supported the use of contraception within the context of a monogamous relationship as a means of reducing infant mortality. For this reason, she now described contraception as a “life-promoting principle”; however, it is clear she believed that contraception ought to promote specific kinds of lives. As she put it, contraception would allow parents to “secure the well-being of two or three children they can raise properly instead of giving a great number of children who are biologically inferior and doomed to an early death” (104). If the state wanted to increase the fertility rate, Meisel-Hess argued, it must work to establish social and economic conditions that would enable

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112. Curiously, on that same page Meisel-Hess wrote, “The colonization of foreign lands for the purpose of the expansion of race is only sensible if these lands are fertile and in good shape, so that the race can prosper.”
husbands and wives to feed the children they bring into the world, as individuals were already restricting their fertility in response to their economic capacity. As she noted, the restriction of births was only a “provisional-practical solution” (provisorisch-praktische Lösung) that rested with the individual; the social solution lay in the realm of social politics and involved “the fight against pauperism and banditry in the state, through a just division of property and power, and . . . through a determination of how many people within a particular area (Kulturzone) could be provided for (überhaupt ernährt werden können), so that they can achieve an age of work (Erwerbsalter) and, at that point, find lasting work and nourishment” (84–85). Meisel-Hess’s ideal vision of a postwar state was a socialistic one, premised upon a eugenic version of reproductive justice: that is, it would be a state wherein every healthy woman who wanted to become a mother could do so, and every child born was desired and had a fighting chance not only to reach maturity but to enjoy a baseline standard of welfare and social care (93).

Another unabashed, yet equally eugenic, defender of women’s reproductive rights was Mathilde Vaerting, who insisted that it was the prohibition and lack of regulation of contraceptives and abortion that was truly damaging to the survival of the Volk. In her 1917 article, “On the Influence of the War on Sex with Contraceptives (Präventivverkehr) and Abortion and Their Eugenic Consequences,” Vaerting argued that “the proper termination of a developing life that resulted from having sex with a defective contraceptive is urgently required for eugenic reasons” (176). While not necessarily an unequivocal champion of contraceptives, Vaerting pointed out that when good contraceptives are inaccessible, individuals resort to poor-quality substitutes, which she claimed not only failed to prevent births but also weakened and damaged the sperm that made it to the ovum and ultimately created “inferior quality” children (139). She further pointed out the damaging effects of nonmedical abortions on women’s health and future fertility, and on the quality of children born following botched procedures (176). Instead of inhibiting the use of contraceptives and the provision of abortions, Vaerting argued that the state ought to exercise better regulation and quality control in the production of
contraceptives, and educate more people on the use of good technologies (177–178). As Vaerting pointed out, whether contraceptives or abortion was made legal or not, “an intelligent and talented woman” who wants to terminate a pregnancy will find “means and ways” to realize her goal (176). Vaerting insisted that her proposals would ultimately prove most successful in the long run, as they would incite and support individuals’ “free and inner wishes and desires for children” (179). While Vaerting’s proposals may have been radical, she insisted that they were unquestionably necessary. “Since the war has already damaged the quality of the population to an unbelievable degree,” she declared, “it is therefore our duty to be doubly vigilant towards all further eugenic damages” (176).

Particularly when it comes to reproductive rights and freedoms, the analyses, critiques, and reforms proposed by Vaerting, Fürth, Meisel-Hess, and Stöcker between 1914 and 1918 appear empowering to women. They speak to the fact that the war provided a unique opportunity to advance radical new analyses of sexual life and demands for its reform—and that eugenics once again proved a sturdy vehicle for their articulation. As was the case before the war, these analyses reflected unequal evaluations of particular kinds of lives, and were certainly not meant to serve as universal demands on behalf of all women. For example, in her arguments on behalf of contraceptives and the legalization of abortion, Mathilde Vaerting made the case that the criminalization of abortion was effectively “a direct protective law for stupidity, because it exclusively favors the stronger reproduction of ungifted parents” (“Über den Einfluß,” 176). Moreover, the radicalization of women sexologists’ demands for reproductive rights was not always a straightforwardly good thing. During the war, one begins to encounter women openly championing sterilization as a means of preventing the unfit from reproducing. Although Meisel-Hess did not generally support abortion, she did support involuntary abortions and even sterilization among the “severely degenerated and serious criminals” (Das Wesen der Geschlechtlichkeit, 179–182). For Henriette Fürth, forced sterilization was such an extreme intervention into intimate life and so underresearched that she maintained that laypeople must abstain from judging these measures; nevertheless,
she did maintain that there existed “a whole range of other cases,” including “consumptives and other incurably burdened peoples,” where “the use of contraception would be desirable for personal and racial political (rassepoltischen) reasons, yet the application of more violent methods [such as sterilization] would be absolutely impossible.”

Fürth thus supported contraceptions on eugenic grounds, and cited “prominent scientists” and medical experts who opposed anticontraception laws to support her position. It is not entirely clear that she viewed their use as voluntary.

Even the rehabilitation of monogamy was proposed as a means not just of ending widespread sexual excesses among men, but of eradicating what Grete Meisel-Hess had called “intermediate” types (Grenztypen) of women. Meisel-Hess insisted that monogamy constituted the only means of cultivating and maintaining a “pure” and highly cultivated race, as monogamy itself was an evolutionary achievement representing the “highest cultural ideal” realized by “advanced races.” While eugenic thought once again proved productive and rhetorically powerful for female sexual theorists, its dangerous implications were exacerbated by the anxieties the war inspired, and by the perceived need for drastic remedies to rescue sexual morality and the population itself. The proposed solutions clearly would have unevenly impacted women based on their biopolitical desirability; yet even those women empowered by such reforms would only have benefited as a result of the subsumption of their rights claims within larger arguments regarding the health and well-being of the race. Despite women’s sexologists’ insistence that women be treated as ends in themselves, their reliance upon and investments in eugenics meant that women and

114. Ibid., 205–206.
their rights would once again be treated as means to an end, render-
ing the case that women deserved rights as women all the more dif-
cult to make.

While the ideas, analyses, and even prescriptions offered by women sexologists over the course of the war bore many similarities to those of their male peers, their analyses of sexual problems and proposals for postwar reform differed significantly from those offered by men. Women's analyses gave greater credence to women's subjective experiences of the war and drew attention to the ways that agreed-upon problems impacted women differently. When it came to the perceived decline in sexual morality, women writers decried the double standard inherent in their male colleagues' frequent attempts to blame women for the war's sexual problems. While critical of women's sexual promiscuity, they also pointed to the degeneration of male sexuality and men's complicity in sexual decline. Moreover, while female sexual theorists proved equally anxious about the war's effect on the population, they rejected demands that women ought to have more children as a matter of patriotic duty. In defending women's rights to control their own fertility and determine the conditions of their maternity, women sexologists once again made good rhetorical use of eugenics, as they had before the war, with similar ambivalent implications. In response to these changing conditions, they proposed a mix of old and new, practical and arguably idiosyncratic, solutions that they maintained would benefit not only women, but also the race itself. Arguably, the sheer destructiveness of the war gave women sexologists hope that their ideas could play a role in postwar regeneration.

The analyses and reform proposals they offered were developed with a sense of urgency, in a context of anxiety, despair, and perceived existential crisis. These texts represent attempts to comprehend the incomprehensible by using and reinterpreting analytic frameworks developed under much different political and social conditions. While I have been critical of women sexologists' tendency to stress the needs of the race above those of women, or to treat women's rights as a subset of larger racial goals, it perhaps reflects a very real and pressing conviction that the first order of business, when it came to dealing with the war's aftermath, was to
prevent collective annihilation. It is worth recalling that the violence and loss of life during the First World War were unprecedented, and that no one knew how the war would end, or what the world would look like when it did. During the war years, women sexologists were analyzing the immanent, theorizing in uncertainty, and endeavoring to stave off anxieties about unknown collective fates.

When the war finally ended, this uncertainty remained, even though virtually everything had changed. The immediate conditions in Germany at the end of the war—marked by defeat, revolution, abdication, street violence, intraparty strife, stillborn soviets, mass death, and the return of injured and traumatized veterans—provided difficult foundations upon which to imagine better national futures. Despite all of this, some sexologists and reformers remained optimistic: in the October–November 1918 edition of *The New Generation*, Helene Stöcker echoed Maeterlinck as she looked upon the future, hopefully writing, “Up to this point was a bad dream. The beautiful starts now!”

Arguably, women felt the postwar mix of optimism and uncertainty most acutely. Despite their ascension to full citizenship following the Revolution, the memories of what they had endured throughout the war, and what they had lost and gained, loomed large. In the case of Grete Meisel-Hess, the war brought a series of personal tragedies: she lost both her husband and her economic security, and as a consequence sunk into a deep depression that led to her institutionalization in a psychiatric asylum. She died in 1922, at age forty-three. Beyond mourning such losses, women were also anxious and wary about what they might be forced to sacrifice in the new German Republic. Already toward the end of the war, male sexologists were calling for women to return to the home. In an article published in the June 1918 edition of the *Journal for Sexual Science*, Innsbruck-based physician Johannes Dück stressed women’s primary roles and functions as mothers, and encouraged them to return to these exclusively domestic roles as part of their feminine duty and as a means of helping to solve the population

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question. Sexual roles were predetermined by essential biological and psychological differences, he insisted, regardless of what women had accomplished during the war. Because the fate of the people (Völkerschicksal) was bound up with the fate of women (Frauenschicksal), Dück argued that Germany’s fate rested with women’s return to the home and their willingness to make reproduction their primary occupation without protest. As a salve, Dück insisted that women could influence public life through their husbands by wielding their “special power” within the home. Dück’s piece not only marked the resurrection of prewar anti-feminist discourse, but also foreshadowed the attempts to limit women’s social, political, and economic roles in the years to come. Perhaps more importantly, it demonstrated the dangerous polyvalence of tying women’s fate to that of the race.

Regardless of Dück’s desires, a return to the old gender and sexual order was impossible; life had changed too profoundly. Through their participation in the unprecedented total war effort as laborers, administrators, and primary breadwinners, women had shown themselves capable of presumed masculine occupations and obligations in the economy and the family, thereby undermining beliefs regarding innate feminine weakness and dependence. The war marked a definitive break, but women’s full emancipation and empowerment were by no means assured.

Sexology would also be profoundly transformed as a result of the war experience. The sexological field would be reinvigorated through its greater involvement in the new German state’s biopolitical projects aimed at regenerating postwar populations, and through its embrace of new methods and approaches that interrogated the roles social, cultural, and psychological forces played in shaping sex. Women’s contributions to sexology would be equally transformed by these new developments, and informed by the field’s new preoccupations. Particularly in light of what women wrote during the First World War, it is important to note the degree to which they turned away from eugenic arguments and rationale, and

toward psychology and other social sciences in order to understand sex. There are many reasons why eugenics may have lost some of its purchase with female sexual theorists following the war; perhaps in light of the retrenchment of women’s social and economic rights after the war, women became wary of so closely entwining women’s fate with that of the Volk. In any event, women would contribute to the paradigm shifts in sexology during the 1920s, and theorize sex in ways that appear strikingly contemporary to present-day readers: it is to these new ideas that we now turn.