

Anti-Nazism and the Fear of Pronatalism in the American Popular Front

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Abstract

Women in the American Communist Party believed the rise of fascism in Europe was a direct threat to women's rights. Hitler's rise to power and what Communists read as a push to 'nationalize' German women's maternity compelled Communist women to argue that fascism was a threat to women's rights and perpetuated false ideals of 'natural' gender roles. Communist women dutifully followed the party's anti-fascist line; however, they expanded it by arguing that gender inequality was on the rise in fascist nations and women's rights had to move to the forefront of Popular Front struggles. Communists emphasized the rights of mothers and workers in an effort to better secure the rights of women. This article argues that party women rejected Nazi pronatalism, advanced women's rights within the party's 'United Front' and pushed their agenda within the American Communist Party.

Introduction

Because Marxist doctrine challenged women's supposed 'traditional' roles and instead saw gender as a construction that followed changes in modes of production, scores of American women were drawn to the American Communist Party (CPUSA) in the 1930s. These women watched with trepidation as fascism spread throughout Europe with its apparent valuing of women only in regards to their maternity. In Hitler's Germany and other fascist states such as Italy, Spain and Austria, Communists believed there was an effort to 'nationalize'

women's maternity in service to the state. Leading women in the CPUSA, including Margaret Cowl, head of the party's Women's Bureau, and Dorothy McConnell, began to vocalize these fears: they argued that fascism was a threat specifically to women's rights and that it perpetuated false ideals of 'natural' gender roles. Cowl and her allies feared that the rise of fascism was a direct threat to women's rights in Europe and the United States.

Women party members dutifully followed CPUSA's anti-fascist line during the Popular Front. However, they used the party's women's publications, like *The Woman Worker* (later renamed *The Woman Today*) and pamphlets they produced, which expanded on the party's strict emphasis on class struggle, to argue that gender inequality was on the rise in fascist nations. Leading party women argued that fascist dogma elevated the nation above personal liberty and elevated women's reproductive abilities over their right to personal control and political participation. As the party line evolved between 1935 and 1939 into the Popular Front era, Communist women concentrated their efforts on highlighting fascism's threat to equality. The women's press emphasized the rights of mothers and workers in an effort to better secure the rights of women. During the Great Depression, as conditions worsened for working families, the party 'could no longer dismiss domestic issues' or women's issues 'as irrelevant to the class struggle'.¹ It was the party's Women's Bureau that ensured women's issues were addressed, and female leaders used the women's magazines and pamphlets to keep these issues in front of the Central Committee. Party leaders such as Margaret Cowl and Dorothy McConnell, among others, ensured that women's rights were a part of the CPUSA's United Front. In their writings they rejected 'traditional' gender roles and pushed for the recognition of women's right to work and to have control over their own body.² This emphasis became even more urgent as fascism spread.

The traditional narrative suggests that despite the growing female membership and women's leadership in the party, the CPUSA held firm on traditional gender divisions in both the home and the workplace during the Popular Front. Some historians have pointed to the party's rejection of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) as evidence that communists were most interested in preserving the existing gender structure. However, in the 1930s most liberal and left-wing women's rights activists rejected the ERA on the grounds that it handicapped women in the male-dominated workforce.³ Party members pointed to the failure of law to provide men with equality; therefore, they regarded equal rights legislation with scepticism.⁴

Communists rejected the essentializing politics of many women's rights organizations, especially those that supported the ERA, and rejected 'womanhood' as a uniform category of experience. Communist Irene Leslie summarized the party's objection clearly when she stated that 'we do not speak of womankind as one homogenous social mass'.⁵ Their fear was that by looking at women as a whole, it was simple to see that their one commonality, reproduction, could in fact define all of womanhood. As fascist states, specifically Germany, began to strip women's rights and focus on women's value in regards to their maternity alone, women in the CPUSA grew increasingly wary. American Communist women focused their efforts on preserving and expanding women's rights to control their own bodies by calling for open access to birth control and birth control information, and they pushed for labour legislation that prevented the abuse of women and mothers in the workplace.⁶

Nevertheless, some historians have concluded that Popular Front communism was still essentially maternalist in its construction. Van Gosse argued that the party's focus on the home and family as women's sphere stunted any real progress towards women's rights. Gosse specifically explored discourses that upheld women's role as that of mothers and housekeepers. He argued that during the Popular Front, in an effort to appeal to the middle class, the party muted its radical rhetoric and instead reified specific gender expectations.⁷

The only book-length treatment on women in the party is Kate Weigand's *Red Feminism*. While Weigand offers the most comprehensive analysis of women in the party, she concludes that the Popular Front's attempt to appeal to 'mainstream America' prevented the CPUSA from looking to 'cultural and personal factors' of women's oppression and meant that it did not interrogate so-called traditional roles. While she is correct in accusing the Central Committee and the party's bureaucracy of a strict adherence to a Marxian class analysis, her study does not consider the party's women's leadership on gender issues; nor does she offer an examination into the party's women's press.⁸

One of the earliest surveys on party women and their efforts to advance women's rights is Robert Schaffer's article 'Women and the Communist Party'. Schaffer argues that party women failed to challenge traditional gender roles and thus were ineffective in forcing the CPUSA to take a stronger stand against the dangers fascism posed to women's liberty. As evidence he claimed that party matriarch Ella Reeve Bloor's nickname 'Mother' Bloor was symbolic of how the party perceived women's roles both in the home and the party structure.⁹ These studies have suggested that party women failed to undermine traditional

expectations and thus were unable to construct a clear class-based feminism within the party.

Recent scholarship challenges the conclusion that activists' focus on home and family was necessarily maternalist. Kathleen Brown finds it to be a 'problematic construction' that when women's politics 'takes into account familial issues' they are dismissed as maternalist. She particularly challenges Schaffer's analysis of Mother Bloor, pointing out instead that her 'deployment of motherhood' in leftist politics 'was not sentimentalist, essentialist, or naturalist'. Instead Bloor was transforming communist ideology to emphasize the need to 'reproduce life and culture humanely'.¹⁰

The assumption that when women activists focus on household issues it is necessarily a maternalist construction assumes that these activists are forwarding an essentialist politics that emphasizes women's inherent capacity for nurturing and mothering. Communist women rejected essentialism out of hand and followed the Marxist line that gender relations were constructed and therefore that women's 'natural' biological role as mothers was a result of the rise of capitalism. Traditional gender roles were a bourgeois construct used to preserve rights to private property. Communist women instead advanced socialist revolution as the means to achieve equality; however, they knew that in the meantime, serious reforms and campaigns to protect women's existing rights were needed. They therefore responded by pushing a Marxian analysis beyond its traditional boundaries, asserting that women's experiences, including those of mother and wife, were essential to the liberation of all.¹¹

This is most clearly articulated in Communist women's theoretical understanding of race and gender oppression. Communist women tried to push the party to recognize the limits of Marxist analysis in regards to both race and gender. Those women who most clearly articulated this idea were black party women. In his text *Sojourning for Freedom*, Erik S. McDuffie argues that many black women joined the party's ranks because it recognized both race and gender oppression and rejected the strict masculinism inherent in some of the leading Black Nationalist organizations. These women articulated the concept of black women's oppression as triple oppression; specifically arguing that race, gender and class oppression were interlocking systems and that an emancipatory politics that excluded consideration of one of these would never free women or anyone for that matter.¹²

Women like Louise Thompson, Thyra Edwards and, most importantly Claudia Jones, argued that race was actually prior to class,

and therefore black women, and not male industrial workers, were the vanguard of the class movement. Thompson is credited with coining the phrase ‘triple oppression’, but it was Jones who most clearly articulated it as an important aspect of socialist feminism.¹³ Jones essentially argued that the emancipation of all would first require the emancipation of the most oppressed – black women. And women’s emancipation did not require a rejection of motherhood; rather it led to a politicization of motherhood and women’s reproduction.¹⁴ Women’s domestic roles were viewed as potentially revolutionary because of their influence within the working-class home. Party women’s fears that fascism emphasized women’s role solely as wives and mothers exemplify their rejection of maternalism; limitations put on women within Nazi family policy made it frightfully clear what a woman’s place would be within the fascist state and thus stripped the home of any revolutionary potential.

Even more frightening to American anti-fascists was that German family policy could make its way to the United States. Michelle Mouton has argued that between 1918 and 1945, German state officials feared that the German family was in crisis. This led to an array of local and national programmes that would help both the German family and ultimately the nation. However, while the nation organized around the family, families felt their privacy was ‘threatened’ as the state sought to ‘intervene directly and indirectly’ into German family life. This intervention emerged during the Weimar Republic and continued into the National Socialist period, and was influenced by the fears and turmoil that emerged from post-World War I reconstruction and the emerging political demands of women.¹⁵

A post-World War I conservative backlash led to calls for restricting women’s work and their access to contraception and abortion. There were liberal voices that supported women’s right to work, namely the German People’s Party and the German Democratic Party; however, they sought to keep women in ‘traditional’ female occupations that included ‘nursing, teaching, and social work’. The Socialist Party did insist on voluntary motherhood and access to birth control. But the German Communist Party was alone in rejecting the idea that women’s sole and most important role was that of a mother. Its delegates regularly argued that traditional family was a ‘bourgeois institution’, and that women’s right to work, higher wages, collective kitchens and day care would strengthen the family. The party also lamented women’s double burden of wage labour and domestic labour, and pushed for the revision of laws that limited ‘access to contraception and banning abortion’.¹⁶ Much like their counterparts in the United States, German

Communists felt that the state had a duty to ensure women's choices and access to full employment outside the home.

Although Weimar family policy remained largely in keeping with previous legislation, under the National Socialists such policy took on a racial cast. The Nazi Party feared the nation was threatened by a combination of 'communism, feminism, modernism and... racial mixing'. Policing the German family became an essential part of Nazi policy; this meant that an array of professionals were now empowered to intervene in private family affairs, including 'physicians, judges, teachers, welfare and youth department employees, mayors and party members'.¹⁷ Even before the Nazi ascendancy to power, some state authorities argued for the implementation of eugenics policies to ensure the strength of the *Volk*. However, because they could not agree on the nature of those policies, Weimar family policy remained focused on health education.¹⁸ The United States already had eugenics laws in place, beginning in Indiana in 1907. These laws allowed for the sterilization of criminals and other categories of undesirables. The Nazi Party would take these laws a step further. The National Socialists sought to emancipate women 'from emancipation' and 'decried a "perverse" society' in which women refused to have children. The Nazis appealed to conservatives because of their promise to revive the 'traditional' family.¹⁹ The goal became to prevent undesirable women from reproducing, while rewarding Aryan families.

Gisela Bock refers to the Nazi emphasis on the reproductive abilities of particular Aryan women as the 'reproductive aspect of women's unwaged housework'.²⁰ In her analysis, women are at the forefront of Nazi race policy because of their predominance in the so-called private sphere that includes the 'body, sexuality, procreation, and education'. Women were held responsible for 'racial degeneration' or hailed as 'Mothers of the race'. Women's biology became an important preoccupation for the Nazi hierarchy; the aim was not simply to increase the number of childbearing women but also to decrease and/or eliminate the number of 'undesirables' having children. Therefore, American Communist women's fears were substantiated in that, under the Nazis, biology became the primary category by which women had any value, while it also threatened some women's right to have any children at all.²¹

Though German eugenics laws have long been targeted as racist, Bock argues that they were also sexist because behind them were demands for the 'state control of procreation'. Additionally, women's bodies were targeted for sterilization under these laws more than men's

because of the fear that 'degenerate women' were capable of producing more 'degenerate' children. Under Nazi racial hygiene policies, Jews were targeted wholesale as inferior. But there were other populations of 'inferior' women that were considered a threat to the *Volk* and therefore had to be sterilized and prevented from reproducing.²²

American Communists paid particular attention to Nazi policies that rewarded unfettered childbirth. In Nazi Germany, improved economic conditions led to an increased birth rate. But pronatalist policies helped to encourage this rise, particularly the laws prohibiting abortion and allowing for the prosecution of those performing and receiving abortions. Approved births – that is, births that met race hygiene qualifications – were rewarded in some respect, though rewards were meted out strictly to husbands, and to unwed mothers under 'strong eugenic restrictions'. The only award given to mothers directly was the Mother Cross, which came with no money. Marriage loans, up to one thousand marks, were given to men whose wives gave up working. The loans were, however, modelled on similar loans available in France, Italy, Spain and Sweden. In Germany, having more children was rewarded during the repayment of the loan. A quarter of the debt would be forgiven for every additional child born; this was referred to as 'paying off in children' (*abkindern*). Child allowances were a one-time payment of sixty-five marks for each child and ten marks per month for every child after the fifth child; later that was amended to the third child. Payments were made to fathers and restrictions were put on unwed mothers. But all families receiving the marriage loans and the child allowances had to meet the strict racial hygiene criteria.²³

It was these policies that prompted party women to raise their voices against fascism. Even before the party recognized anti-fascism as its primary organizing principle in the Popular Front, women in the CPUSA were pushing for anti-fascist coalitions with non-communists who recognized fascism's danger to women specifically. In 1933 the American League against War and Fascism (ALWF) was founded; Communist women were essential to the organization from the beginning. Eventually CPUSA members would dominate ALWF leadership. The most prominent leader was CPUSA member Dorothy McConnell who would lead the ALWF's Women's Committee and write numerous articles and pamphlets warning American women that their rights were endangered in a world where fascism existed.²⁴

After the Comintern's Seventh World Congress and the articulation of the anti-fascist policy, the CPUSA extended an olive branch to potential allies and the party repudiated 'social fascism'.²⁵ Social

fascism was a derogatory term Communists used to describe reformers. The Popular Front held special appeal to women's rights activists, who could now continue and in some cases expand their work with liberal women's organizations. Women's issues were an important part of the Comintern's Popular Front policy, as the Bulgarian communist Georgi Dimitrov outlined at the Congress. He argued that fascism committed women to 'unprecedented slavery' by driving 'working women out of industry', all the while 'promising a happy home and family life'. In addition he asserted that fascism 'drives women to prostitution' by putting their bodies at the service of the state to propagate the race. Though the state coveted women's reproduction, it stripped women of their rights, reduced their status in the workforce, and provided no protection and assistance to needy working families.²⁶ Dimitrov insisted that fascism 'enslaves women with particular ruthlessness and cynicism playing on the most painful feelings of the mother, the housewife, the single working woman'. Paradoxically, while insisting on protecting women workers, Dimitrov emphasized the home as a female domain and family concerns as party women's responsibility.²⁷ This was the line followed by the CPUSA's Central Committee; women's issues were women's work. This did however create new opportunities for women to advance the party's theoretical understanding of women's oppression. Pushing the limits of Marxism, female cadres challenged 'traditional' roles as strictly the result of capitalism and argued that fascism reduced women's status in both the home and workplace.²⁸

Margaret Cowl, the head of the CPUSA's Women's Commission, paid close attention to the changing rights of women under fascist policy. She feared that limitations on American women's rights to birth control and abortion mirrored Nazi family policy. While this no doubt was an exaggeration, the Nazi threat served the purpose of sensationalizing restrictions on women's reproductive rights. In a 1935 pamphlet titled *Women and Equality*, Cowl pointed to women's right to birth control and to work as paramount in the class struggle. She attacked 'vicious' anti-birth control laws that prevented working families from accessing affordable birth control and abortion. Unemployed women especially had little to no access to contraceptive technology or knowledge. Instead state policies condemned them and their children to a life of poverty.²⁹

The expectation that women should be primarily responsible for child-rearing led to dangerous workplace discrimination and conditions for pregnant women. Cowl argued that some women 'must hide... pregnancy', often endangering themselves 'to the point of deforming'

their bodies and risking their future health, only to keep their jobs. Companies often had policies against pregnant women workers, and there were no state or federal laws in place to prevent firing a woman because of pregnancy. In the absence of maternity insurance a pregnancy meant lost wages during the pregnancy and in the months after birth. Cowl insisted that women should neither be rewarded for reproduction as in Nazi Germany nor punished for choosing to have children, especially in the absence of reliable birth control. Voluntary motherhood was a paramount right for women and Cowl argued for women's access to affordable and sometimes state-funded birth control and abortion.³⁰

Another Communist leader, Rebecca Pitts, addressed women's reproduction in her article 'Women and Communism'. She argued that the absence of control and the power of custom codified in law hampered women's equality and kept women 'enslaved' to their bodies, and that this dangerously mirrored Nazi family policy. 'As for the strictly "biological" problem of womanhood,' Pitts declared, 'adequate contraceptive aid, so that when a child comes it is *wanted*; four months' leave from work, with pay, for the mother; and nurseries where young children are cared for during working hours' would help ease women's burdens.³¹ Communists sought recognition that laws policing motherhood and prohibiting contraception were inherently unequal, fascistic and hampered women's progress towards equality. Pitts took it one step further and argued that women should be freed from their biology, and that they should be given access to technologies that could facilitate that freedom.

Cowl and Pitt articulated a primary focus for the female party leadership: voluntary motherhood was a prerequisite for women's equality. They argued that as long as reproductive control remained out of reach for most women and in the hands of the state, there was no way for women to experience true freedom. As Cowl and Pitt both insisted, legislation that restricted women's access to birth control and abortion meant that voluntary motherhood was often unachievable. What communists feared was that this legislation was not radically different from Germany's pronatalist policies that articulated in law, not just custom, that woman's true value was tied to her biology. Ultimately the party's female leadership advocated women's rights to choose to have children or not and for the state to stay out of this highly personal decision.

The party's women's press took a leading role in agitating against the rise of Nazism and warned about its potential spread to the United States. A Citizens' Anti-Nazi Committee was created within the ALWF and it was responsible for producing agitation and propaganda

(agit-prop) on the Nazi menace. In one pamphlet the committee noted that in Republican Germany, women had been granted full political, legal and economic equality, but under Nazism 'all these gains have been destroyed'. Hitler wasn't interested in women's legal status or rights to 'careers in art, literature, or music'; instead he wanted 'More babies, JUST MORE BABIES!' to provide 'soldiers for the next wars'.³² Communists deployed an old German slogan '*Kinde, Kirche and Kueche*' (the children, the church and the kitchen) to describe women's condition under fascism. In Communist parlance the slogan came to be described as the 'fascist triple K'.³³

The fascist triple K was equivalent to 'household slavery' and condemned women to produce as many children as possible 'in order to provide men for the next imperialist slaughter'.³⁴ Communist Jessie Lloyd O'Connor pointed out that Nazi women engaged in the pronatalist rhetoric by insisting that the Third Reich needed soldiers for its survival. She noted that the Women's Order of the Red Swastika, a women's Nazi group, believed that the highest place and privilege for a woman was 'sending her children to war'.³⁵ Female cadres interpreted this assertion as a call for women to become breeders for the war machine, to ensure the survival of the race and provide cannon fodder for war.

By 1936, *The Woman Today* warned its readers that, as in 1917, 'the women of America' were 'again face to face with the threat of war... face to face with the heartbreak of seeing their loved ones slaughtered and maimed'.³⁶ The newspaper's editor, Margaret Cowl, asserted that women, specifically mothers, had a responsibility to lead the anti-fascist movement, because 'Who, if not the mothers of our youth and the wives of our men, must give leadership to the peace movement?'³⁷

Communist emphasis on mothers' responsibility to lead peace movements plays on the very 'natural' gender roles that American Communist women rejected. However, these women engaged this language in their agit-prop in an attempt to broaden their Popular Front coalition beyond the Communist Party. Unlike other American maternalist activists, Communists did not deploy discourses about women's innate abilities to mother; rather they described the potential for revolution beginning within the working-class home. This required women's autonomous development as workers, mothers and wives. However, rather than waiting for some far-off revolution, Margaret Cowl and other leaders pushed for concrete political goals such as increasing women's wages, providing opportunities for working women, and emphasizing the right to voluntary motherhood through access to abortion and birth control.

To drive home this point, in 1937, Dorothy McConnell, the communist representative within the ALWF leadership, argued that Mother's Day should be used as an anti-fascist holiday. McConnell highlighted women's revolutionary potential by rejecting the 'sickly sentiments' found in greeting cards: these merely celebrated mothers as passive and apolitical; the true purpose of the annual celebration was to enrich 'florists, merchants, confectioners'. Instead of celebrating women as passive figureheads, she admonished women to remember the sacrifices mothers made for the useless slaughters of World War I. With fascist states on the horizon and so-called fascist legislation restricting women's rights in the United States, Mother's Day could be transformed into a day for revolution. She argued women should organize for 'mothers' pensions, better housing, maternity insurance... better schools'.³⁸ The observance of Mother's Day, McConnell argued, should become an observance of peace and a day of action against fascism, not a day to make capitalists wealthy and women seem irrelevant.

What also set party women apart from the CPUSA leadership was the demand to recognize women's household labour as productive. While the party leadership focused on industrial workers, McConnell suggested that Mother's Day could also be a day of observance for women's household labour. She encouraged party women to get involved in Popular Front campaigns. Most importantly, McConnell also insisted that reproductive labour was a form of labour that would be endangered under fascism. She warned that if women did not resist fascism they could see what lay ahead within Nazi Germany – and what lay ahead was war. Her pamphlet encouraged women to be sure their reproductive labour 'is not going to be blown to bits because of some economic tangle the world may have gotten into'.³⁹

Women's workplace rights were also at the forefront of anti-fascist Popular Front campaigns, specifically for the female leadership, who used the party press to convince the communist rank and file that the threat to women was real and urgent. McConnell produced a pamphlet in 1935 titled *Women, War and Fascism*, which focused on the fascist threat to women's labour outside the home. Once again using Nazi policy to highlight the real danger women faced with the spread of fascism, she argued that German pronatalist policies limiting women to a role as mere breeders served also to limit women's rights in the workplace. More damning was how similar many of these laws were to those in democratic states such as the United States. McConnell claimed that a global 'drive against women' had emerged which was 'even more

drastic than any drive against racial minorities' and 'has become in the last three years a world movement which includes the United States'. During the Depression women's employment, specifically married women's, was believed to be a cause for high male unemployment. Therefore, both fascist and democratic states pushed to restrict married women's work.⁴⁰

The Depression allowed nations to further restrict women's work under the guise of creating jobs for men; these laws too were not specific to either fascist or democratic states. In Germany, for instance, women were removed from federal positions if their husbands were also employed by the government. The law was later extended to include the daughters of government officials. Marriage loans were refused to women unless they relinquished their employment. In Italy, women's employment was limited in public posts, with the goal of eliminating it entirely. By 1933, the Italian decree extended to private industries. In Austria, no married woman was allowed to work in public service if her husband was employed by the government, unless she had three children. Similar legislation in Germany allowed women with three or more children to secure their employment.⁴¹ Women's right to work was secured within the fascist states, so long as they fulfilled their reproductive duties.

As disturbing as those restrictions appeared, McConnell pointed out that democratic states used similar methods to limit women's rights to work. While the Depression left millions of men unemployed, married women were forced out of jobs in public and private industries by social custom. For example, Section 213A of the 1932 National Economy Act prohibited both husband and wife from working in civil service positions. The danger of this legislation, according to McConnell, was 'the official sanction it gave to the country at large in its drive against women employees'. Three-fourths of those fired under Section 213A were women, creating only 1,600 new jobs.⁴² The sacrifice made by female workers hardly made an impact on the high rates of unemployment. Individual states also passed several laws restricting women's employment. For example, married teachers would be fired, forcing some couples to postpone marriage.⁴³ Behind this legislation was the troubling assumption that women belonged in the home, dependent on a male breadwinner, and those who chose to continue working were often accused of taking jobs from men.

Black party women vocalized their concerns that if white women's rights were restricted they would face even more barriers to their already limited rights. Thyra Edwards, a black Party member, argued

that fascism certainly threatened women, but it was the most vulnerable that could lose the most under fascist leadership. She referred specifically to black women who faced race, class and gender discrimination and stood to lose the most under fascist leadership, especially since fascist policy was specifically racialized. Thus black women faced not just oppression but potentially elimination.⁴⁴

The female cadres writing in the party's women's presses, such as Cowl, McConnell and Edwards, emphasized the consequences of discriminatory legislation and argued that it undermined the stability of the working-class family, both black and white. McConnell feared that the emphasis on specific gender roles ignored the reality of working families. Few working-class families, especially black families, could afford to lose a woman's income. McConnell argued that leaving families to depend on one income jeopardized the ability of families to support themselves, pay the rent or mortgage, or provide for their children's education. Legislation restricting married women's work in the United States actually threatened families because marriage was often 'postponed' or unmarried couples forced to live 'together without legal sanction' in order to protect the woman's job.⁴⁵ McConnell concluded that whether in Nazi Germany or the United States, this discriminatory legislation attacked the stability of the working-class home and family and undermined women's autonomy, not to mention women's economic independence.

Sadly it was not just legislatures or employers that were forcing women out of work: social pressure often forced legislators and employers to change policies. McConnell highlighted the case of a large railroad company that had begun dismissing married, female employees, but not in an effort to create more jobs for men: rather the movement to fire women 'had originated with the young men employees in the offices' who had lost jobs and would benefit the most from the 'departure of the married women'. These men later included in their request that unmarried daughters of railroad workers also be dismissed.⁴⁶ Both state sanctions and social discrimination that targeted women's right to work meant the state condoned discrimination against women.⁴⁷

McConnell believed that replacing women with unemployed male workers accomplished two ends that were desirable both in democratic America and fascist Germany. First, the government could clear names off the unemployment list by making women unemployable and forcing women into low-paid job ghettos, forcing wages down – a clear benefit to capitalists. Second, McConnell suggested that as in Germany,

legislation such as Section 213A paved the way for employers to force female workers out and hire men at ‘women’s wage’ rates.⁴⁸

There was however a major contradiction in German pronatalism. Because war required ‘faithful workers behind the lines’ to ensure production, while men are shipped to the front lines, ‘there is a cheap labour not needed at the front which can be swung instantly into these factories, farms and offices’. That cheap labour was women’s temporary wartime labour. But as McConnell pointed out, even during a national emergency women’s labour was still not valued as highly as men’s. In Germany, in an effort to appease conservatives worried about compromising women’s roles, women were removed from white-collar work and forced into low-paying industrial jobs. Therefore, only during wartime was it justified for women to work outside the home rather than focus on the *Reich’s* goal to produce more racially pure children. Instead ‘women must be in the arsenals and munition plants’ to preserve the nation. Despite propaganda that clearly defined gender roles, women’s employment in Hitler’s Germany had actually increased. McConnell argued that the problem was not that women were not working: ‘under fascism women are not barred from the working world. Far from it’.⁴⁹ Women’s labour would be equally important during wartime, but women’s value would nevertheless remain the same, as evidenced by the low-paying, low-skilled jobs they were allowed to have.

Women were a convenient and cheap source of temporary labour. Yet expectations that women should remain at home left working-class women in the position of needing to find work while being condemned for doing so. McConnell argued that women had to join the rank and file of the party in order to resist similar fascist policies from limiting their right to work. As McConnell demonstrated, the US already had its share of fascist legislation, like Section 213A, that scapegoated women and limited their opportunities. While the CPUSA focused on the fascist threat to trade unions and the Soviet Union, women communist leaders argued that female workers urgently needed protection from fascist legislation within the US.⁵⁰

Part of the anti-fascist imperative was to protect the unity of all workers. The party leadership, despite its myopia on women’s issues, did encourage women’s integration into trade and industrial unions. Communist Louise Bransten sounded the alarm in 1936, warning that war ‘brings fascism’ and that fascism ‘must break the trade unions in order to preserve private profit’. The clearest evidence was the Nazi dissolution of German unions. Once again, Bransten noted, fascist policy reared its vicious head in the United States, as laws were passed

throughout the 1930s that tried to stem the influence of labour during wartime. One example was the Tydings-McCormick Military Disaffection Bill, introduced in 1935. The bill would have punished a worker with a fine or imprisonment if he ‘criticized federal war appropriations’ or had he ‘protested the use of the National Guard in a strike’. Although the bill was never made law, Bransten used the act as a rallying point to encourage the female readership of *The Woman Today* to join the party in its campaign against war and fascism. Bransten argued that a true United Front required the integration of female workers into labour unions.⁵¹ Therefore, CPUSA women argued that trade unions could and should provide additional protection for women against fascism.

McConnell joined Bransten in sounding the alarm that fascism would divide the working classes by encouraging women to leave the workforce and dissolving unions. McConnell reminded her readers in her pamphlet that, whether democrat or fascist, all states found a use for women’s labour during wartime. McConnell insisted that a woman worker was ‘as much a warrior’ as a man on the battlefield and that war was a threat to all workers, women and men. Unions that welcome women could be used to educate working people ‘against war’, and ‘all haters of fascism’ should unite against legislation that hampered any worker. Laws such as 213A were dangerous because they gave ‘government sanction to the discrimination against women’.⁵² And if the government could discriminate against women, it was only a matter of time before male workers were targeted as well.

Restrictions on married women’s work reified gender roles that continued to restrict women’s rights in the workplace and at home. Since few valued women’s household labour as productive labour, limiting women to the home was essentially limiting women to the same roles that Nazi Germany prescribed – thus the fascist triple K was used as a warning to the readers of party women’s pamphlets and *The Woman Today* that so-called traditional gender roles enslaved women to the home. McConnell and Cowl, as two of the most vocal communist women leaders and prolific writers for the party presses, insisted that women had to be as invested in the ‘United Front’ as men: it was important not just in order to preserve their workplace rights; indeed, anti-fascist resistance was an attempt to resist any restrictions on women’s autonomy. They argued that the party and trade unions, those most interested in working-class unity, had to denounce gender and race discrimination as fascist and push for equality to secure women’s right to work and the right to voluntary motherhood.

As evidenced in party publications, women in the CPUSA felt it was urgent to draw attention to the danger fascism posed to women's rights. These fears were fuelled by German laws that sought to control and manipulate reproduction in service to the *Reich*. It appeared that German women were at the mercy of the state, disempowered and disenfranchised: Germany's war machine depended on the continued production of Aryan babies and this left women enslaved to racist and sexist Nazi dogma. Additionally, though under German pronatalism women were expected to stay home, wartime necessity used their labour and simultaneously devalued it.

Communist women leaders like Margaret Cowl and Dorothy McConnell argued that American women were in a scarcely better position, faced with limited access to birth control information and abortion, discrimination against pregnant women in the workforce and barriers to economic independence, with little to no representation from trade unions. They claimed that without active anti-fascist resistance women could not expect to gain the right to control their own bodies or protection from discrimination in the workplace. Communist women drew attention to the parallels between German pronatalism and the limited rights of American women. The spread of fascism across the European continent only made women's rights more urgent and the call for birth control and labour rights more desperate.

The Popular Front mandate encouraged American Communist women to push the boundaries of Marxist dogma and highlight women's vulnerable status outside of a strictly class-based analysis. The party's new attention on the working-class home allowed for more emphasis on family, not just shop-floor politics. Women in the CPUSA moved their agenda to the forefront of communist anti-fascism, demonstrating the dangers that female workers faced under fascist rule. The fear was that laws to control women were just a stepping stone towards other fascist laws; in other words, limitations on women's rights limited everyone's rights. For American communist women, the measure of a nation's democracy could be seen in how its women were treated. In this regard, the women of the United States appeared to be in grave danger.

Notes

- 1 Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 23.
- 2 Constance Coiner, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel LeSueur* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 56–7. Women specifically

- were drawn into the CPUSA in the 1930s because of its broad women's rights agenda. The CPUSA reached 100,000 members in 1939; this would be its peak as membership fluctuated dramatically. Around 1933, the female membership was 16 percent; that rose to 25 percent by 1936. By 1940, women's membership would rise dramatically to 40 percent, reaching its peak in 1943 at 46 percent. It was the Popular Front that drew women into the party in larger numbers. See Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 23; John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Storming Heaven Itself: The American Communist Movement* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 1; Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 120.
- 3 Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Why Were Most Politically Active Women Opposed to the ERA in the 1920s?" in *US History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).
 - 4 Van Gosse, "'To Organize in Every Neighborhood, in Every Home': The Gender Politics of American Communists Between the Wars," *Radical History Review* (Spring 1991): 109–41.
 - 5 Irene Leslie, "Lenin on the Woman Question," *The Communist* (March 1936): 245.
 - 6 Denise Lynn, "Framing Women: American Communism, the Women's Charter, and the Equal Rights Amendment, 1936–1938," *Women's History Review* 8, no. 2 (April 2014): 1–16.
 - 7 Gosse, "To Organize in Every Neighborhood," 109–41.
 - 8 Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 26 and Gosse, "To Organize in Every Neighborhood," 132–3.
 - 9 Robert Schaffer, "Women and the Communist Party, USA, 1930–1940," *Socialist Review* 45 (May–June 1979): 87. Constance Coiner departs from earlier studies of the party in her examination of Communist authors Meridel Le Sueur and Tillie Olson. She agrees that the party endorsed traditional roles because 'they focused on workers and few women worked outside the home' and that the party's approach to the 'woman question' focused on socialism as the answer.
 - Coiner claims that authors Olson and Le Sueur narrated class 'as a fundamentally gendered construct and gender as a fundamentally classed one'. Like other Communists, Olson and Le Sueur functioned outside the bounds of the party, emphasizing the gendered nature of women's oppression coupled with class and race. Coiner argues that while the CPUSA itself did not critique traditional roles, women in the party were not silent on the issue. See Coiner, *Better Red*.
 - 10 Kathleen Brown, "'The 'Savagely Fathered and Un-Mothered World' of the Communist Party, USA: Feminism, Maternalism, and 'Mother Blood'," *Feminist Studies* 25 (Fall 1999): 1. Elsa Jane Dixler, "The Woman Question: Women and the American Communist Party, 1929–1941" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1974), 59–65. The most absurd assertion of Ella Reeve Bloor's maternalism appeared in Elsa Jane Dixler's 1974 dissertation in which she argues that Bloor inspired affection from party members, but was never believed to be an effective leader. Because of Bloor's advanced age, Dixler insists, she was identified as a motherly figure. Dixler goes on to argue that Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, another prominent female party leader, 'was not called "Mother,"' however, 'Flynn's extreme obesity gave her a "maternal" appearance'. While age and physical girth define political persona in Dixler's analysis, she neglects to offer an account of both Flynn's and Bloor's leadership for the decades both women spent in the party. Both women, particularly Bloor, continued their political alliances from their years as Socialists and remained independent of the party apparatus by strengthening ties with a large community of political activists and organizations.
 - 11 Grace Hutchins, *Women Who Work* (New York: International Publishers, 1934), 9.
 - 12 Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.
 - 13 McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 4, 61. While McDuffie rightly looks to black women's important role in articulating an inclusive Marxian analysis, he unfortunately falls prey to the same

- trap earlier historians of communist women did. He argues that these women failed to challenge and thus undermine women's traditional roles. Sadly this is a failure to see that communist women politicized women's so-called traditional roles and argued that, while the home was a site for women's oppression, so too was it a site for women's liberation.
- 14 Denise Lynn, "Socialist Feminism and Triple Oppression: Claudia Jones and Women's Liberation in American Communism," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* (Fall 2014): 1–20.
 - 15 Michelle Mouton, *From Nurturing the Nation to Purifying the Volk: Weimar and Nazi Family Policy, 1918–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2. The devastation of World War I left Germany with a number of widows, a large proportion of the young male population dead, a falling birthrate, and a gender imbalance that left a significant population of unmarried women. There were also a number of women that moved into the workforce during the long absences of men at war; many of these women wished to remain in those jobs.
 - 16 Mouton, *From Nurturing the Nation to Purifying the Volk*, 7–8.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, 3–4.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, 10.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, 11–12.
 - 20 Gisela Bock, "Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization, and the State," in *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman and Marion Kaplan (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), 271.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, 272–3.
 - 22 *Ibid.*, 275.
 - 23 *Ibid.*, 278, 283–4.
 - 24 Ella Reeve Bloor, *We Are Many*, Ella Reeve Bloor Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, 253.
 - 25 James Ryan, *Earl Browder: The Failure of American Communism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 84–5.
 - 26 Georgi Dimitrov, *The United Front Against Fascism and War* (September 1935), Dorothy Healey Collection, California State University, Long Beach Library, Long Beach, CA, 33.
 - 27 Dimitrov, *The United Front*, 32–3.
 - 28 Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 15–25. According to communist propaganda, Germany's unbridled emphasis on maternity led to the erosion of German women's rights. The reality is that Nazi women did push to have a greater voice in Nazi Germany and attempted to preserve women's limited legal rights. Some argued that women's inferior status was actually rooted in Judaism and ancient Roman law, thereby linking it to Nazi racial policy. Despite their efforts, by 1937, those women trying to forge a place for women within Nazism were largely silenced and German women's rights gradually eroded further.
 - 29 Margaret Cowl, "Women and Equality," Workers' Library Publishers, February 1935, 10.
 - 30 Cowl, "Women and Equality," 10.
 - 31 Rebecca Pitts, "Women and Communism," *New Masses*, 19 February 1935, 15.
 - 32 Citizens' Anti-Nazi Committee of the American League Against War and Fascism, "The Swastika Menaces Everyone," American League for Peace and Democracy Papers, Swarthmore Peace Collection, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, PA.
 - 33 Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War*, 15–25.
 - 34 Jessie Lloyd O'Connor, "Speaker's Outline on Women, War, and Fascism," Jessie Lloyd O'Connor Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, 1934, 3.
 - 35 O'Connor, "Speaker's Outline," 3.
 - 36 Analy Wax, "August 1914–1936," *Woman Today*, August 1936, 5.
 - 37 Wax, "August 1914–1936," 5.
 - 38 Dorothy McConnell, "Gold Stars and Carnations," *Woman Today*, May 1937, 4.
 - 39 *Ibid.*, 4.
 - 40 McConnell, *Women, War and Fascism* (New York: American League Against War and Fascism, 1935), 5.
 - 41 *Ibid.*, 7–8.
 - 42 The party claimed that as a direct result 1,603 individuals lost their jobs, three-fourths of whom were women. Margaret Cowl, "Views on News," *Woman Today*, May 1936, 15.
 - 43 McConnell, *Women, War and Fascism*, 9–10.

- 44 Lynn, "Framing Women," 9.
- 45 McConnell, *Women, War and Fascism*, 9.
- 46 Ibid., 10–11.
- 47 Ware, *Holding Their Own*, 27–8.
- 48 McConnell, *Women, War and Fascism*, 13–14.
- 49 Ibid., 6.
- 50 Louise Bransten, "Peace and the Trade Unions," *Woman Today*, December 1936, 5.
- 51 Ibid., 5.
- 52 McConnell, *Women, War and Fascism*, 18.