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“Junge Mädchen” and “Daughters of the Sky”: Transatlantic Changes in the Construction of Femininity after 1930

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Abstract

The difference between the representation of German femininity in the 1920s and the 1930s is striking: while glamorous flappers with bob haircuts ruled the beginning of the interwar period, its end is characterized by serious and earnest—and often longhaired—young women. Rather than taking the obvious route of relating this change to the political changes in Germany, most importantly the rise of the Nazis, this article argues that the changing representation of interwar femininity in Germany was always embedded in a transnational, transatlantic process. The transformation of flappers into humble girls started well before the Nazis came to power and was fueled by a wide variety of voices, from communist to bourgeois actors.

Keywords: Weimar Republic; gender; femininity; interwar; transatlantic; Great Depression; National Socialism

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Introduction

In 1936, the influential German magazine *Der Querschnitt* described the 1930s as the “era of the young girls.”¹ An accompanying photograph showed two representatives of this new type of German femininity: blond girls in field hockey uniform, representing a vaguely Aryan ideal of youthfulness, modesty, and athleticism. See [Figure 1](#). In the picture, both girls wear a modern bob haircut, and the stiff sports jersey gives them a sportive, yet homely air. They carry their hockey sticks over their shoulders in resolute fashion, yet they avoid the gaze of the photographer, giggling between themselves.

In its exploration of this new type of femininity supposedly so representative of the times, the magazine drew on the past, namely on musings about young women by canonical German writers Goethe and Jean Paul, without really committing to a strict definition of its own. The text was more explicit in its rejection of the female type that had come before: “*das Girl*” of the 1920s—“a creature with an accentuated determination to be ‘saucy’”—was described as the awkward predecessor of the “*junge Mädchen*.” The “*Girl*” figure had been a staple of German culture since the end of the First World War and not only embodied

¹ Nikolas Knobel, “Das Zeitalter der jungen Mädchen,” *Der Querschnitt*, May 1936, 263–66.



Figure 1. Photograph titled “Young Girls of Today,” *Der Querschnitt*, May 1936, p. 265.

changing postwar gender roles, but also reflected an increasing interaction with American culture. “*Das Girl*” took her cue from the American flapper: bob-haired, glamorous, raunchy, she represented a modern, cosmopolitan femininity, which had, according to *Der Querschnitt*, become outdated in the 1930s.²

² For the American influence on German notions of the “*Girl*,” see Nina Sylvester, “*Das Girl*: Crossing Spaces and Spheres. The Function of the Girl in the Weimar Republic” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2006), 11–14; Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 120–27; Nancy Cott, “The Modern Woman of the 1920s, American Style,” in *A History of Women in the West*, vol 5, *Toward a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Françoise Thébaud (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 76–91.

The superseding of “*das Girl*” by the “*junge Mädchen*” was an aspect of a broad change in gender representation in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The literature exploring these changes has shown how, starting as early as 1927, a return to excessively feminine styles, a glorification of motherhood, and an insistence on gender difference in popular culture, advertisements, fashion, and political campaigns challenged the ideal of the “New Woman” that had gained popularity in Germany after 1918.³ In much of the literature, this process is linked to the political changes in Germany around the same time: increasing political radicalization, the deterioration of democratic institutions, and, most importantly, the rise of the Nazis as a national political force. In this perspective, the Americanized “*Girl*” type stands for the Western-oriented liberal democracy of the Weimar Republic, while the “*junge Mädchen*” represents the “blood and soil” nationalism of Nazi Germany that superseded it.

This article offers an alternative interpretation that tries to transcend this exclusively national perspective on changes in gender representation in the 1930s. While national political developments surely had an influence on the construction of German femininity, the broader shift itself was part of an international trend, sparked by global economic and social upheavals and fueled by an intense cultural exchange. Through a comparison with similar developments in the United States, the home of important cultural influences on German ideas about modern femininity, the article examines common changes in constructions of femininity as a transatlantic reaction to the shock to the global capitalist system during the 1930s. In doing so, the article answers recent calls for a “globalization” and “provincialization” of the history of the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany.⁴ Furthermore, this comparative lens transcends the framework of national political systems and their periodization: rather than the standard chronology of the Weimar Republic followed by the Nazi period, the interwar period provides a more fruitful frame to discuss changes in the transnational construction of femininity. In particular, this article looks at popular culture discourses between the mid-1920 and 1937, and in this time frame, the year 1933 becomes a less important caesura than the onset of the Great Depression in 1929–1930. In this comparative perspective, the transformation of the ideal of the modern German woman was in fact foreshadowing, rather than reflecting, the gender politics of the Nazis; it puts Nazi Germany into the broad context of Western culture rather than treating it as an aberration from it.

This interpretation builds on recent research showing that representations and practices of modern femininity became a global phenomenon during the interwar years. In particular, the Modern Girl around the World Research Group has done important work highlighting the global dimension of national phenomena like the American flapper, the German “*neue Frau*,” or the “*modan garu*” in Japan.⁵ By introducing the “heuristic device” of the modern girl, both a representation and a practice of modern femininity shaped by “global commodity and cultural flows,” the associated researchers show how the “provincializing” of Europe

³ Although the body of scholarship on the “New Woman” is vast, the shift in gender representation in the 1930s is often overlooked. The most important works that focus on this aspect are Atina Grossmann, “*Girlkultur* or Thoroughly Rationalized Female: A New Woman in Weimar Germany?,” in *Women in Culture and Politics: A Century of Change*, ed. Judith Friedlander et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 62–80; Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Julia Sneeringer, *Winning Women’s Votes: Propaganda and Politics in Weimar Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). See also Jochen Hung, “The Modernized Gretchen. Transformations of the New Woman in the Late Weimar Republic,” *German History* 33, no. 1 (2015): 52–79.

⁴ Christoph Cornelißen and Dirk van Laak, “Einleitung: Die (Ent-)Provincialisierung Weimars,” in *Weimar und die Welt: Globale Verflechtungen der ersten deutschen Republik*, ed. Christoph Cornelißen and Dirk van Laak (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 9–21; Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, “Introduction,” in *Fascism without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe, 1918–1945*, ed. Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe (New York: Berghahn, 2019), 1–38.

⁵ Alys Eve Weinbaum et al., ed., *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity and Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). See also Elizabeth Otto and Vanessa Rocco, ed., *The New Woman International: Representations in Photography and Film from the 1870s through the 1960s* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

can actually work.⁶ Although cultural impulses from the United States played a central role in supplying much of the imagery associated with the modern girl, its various interpretations, adaptations, and expressions incorporated local and regional elements. As this article shows, this also applies to the “junge Mädchen,” albeit in a different fashion: while superficially, this figure represented a rejection of American influence, it was still built on an intense interaction with American culture.

To be able to design a catch-all concept incorporating a wide range of diverse phenomena, however, the Modern Girl around the World researchers deliberately refused to use “temporal progression as the basis of comparison.”⁷ This makes the modern girl a rather static, inflexible concept unable to address the transformative changes in the processes that they argue shaped this model of femininity—global flows of commodities and culture—during the 1930s. This weakness is apparent in Uta Poiger’s application of the concept of the modern girl to interwar representations of modern femininity in German cosmetic advertisements.⁸ While she interprets the “cosmopolitan aesthetic” of the 1920s as a reflection of an internationalist, modern worldview, the dominant imagery of the Nazi era is described as a retreat into a narrow, nationalist, and racist outlook. Nazi politics certainly had a profound influence on representations of femininity in Germany, not least through institutions like the supervisory council for advertising (*Werberat der deutschen Wirtschaft*), a body under the control of the Ministry of Propaganda, which supervised and controlled the German advertising trade, shaping the way women were depicted in commercials.⁹ However, this article argues that this shift toward a more wholesome, conservative aesthetic had begun already years before the Nazis came into power, had been driven by a wide variety of actors, and was part of a broader, transnational trend. The shift intersected with the intense German interaction with “America” that did not end in the 1930s: while the “junge Mädchen” and similar representations were constructed as an explicit rejection of American cultural influences, they in fact showed an ongoing cultural interaction with the United States, where similar changes in the representation of femininity were happening at the same time.¹⁰ The sociocultural upheaval wreaked by the Great Depression represented the dominant, transnational context for both these processes happening on a national scale.

American Femininity in 1920s Germany

The idea of “America” played a central role in German interwar culture and in particular in the construction of modern femininity. The figure of the Americanized “Girl” had already been introduced to German culture at the turn of the century with the “Gibson Girl” cigarette brand produced by the German Manoli company, which imported the American prewar beauty ideal to sell their product.¹¹ In the Weimar Republic, however, the most prominent representatives of American femininity were film stars like Louise Brooks and Clara Bow or the nameless chorus girls in dancing troupes like the “Ziegfeld Girls,” who toured the European continent. These representatives of the American “flapper girl” supplied the visual elements of the German “Girl” type: a short bob haircut, slim figure, the use of makeup, and dressed in a modern, glamorous, sexualized fashion. It is important to emphasize that it was

⁶ Alys Eve Weinbaum et al., “The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device: Collaboration, Connective Comparison, Multidirectional Citation,” in *Modern Girl Around the World*, 1–24; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

⁷ Weinbaum et al., “The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device,” 6.

⁸ Uta Poiger, “Fantasies of Universality? Neue Frauen, Race, and Nation in Weimar and Nazi Germany,” in *The Modern Girl Around the World*, 317–44.

⁹ On the *Werberat*, see Uwe Westphal, *Werbung im Dritten Reich* (Berlin: Transit, 1989).

¹⁰ See Irmgard Roebing, “‘Haarschnitt ist noch nicht Freiheit.’ Das Ringen um Bilder der Neuen Frau in Texten von Autorinnen und Autoren der Weimarer Republik,” *Jahrbuch zur Literatur der Weimarer Republik* 5 (1999–2000): 18–24.

¹¹ Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895–1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 27–49.

more often the homegrown, German idea of “America” rather than the realities of life in the United States that shaped the local construction of modern femininity. In this sense, as Mary Nolan has argued, “The United States provided a language through which different countries and cultures could develop their own visions of modernity.”¹²

In 1927, the liberal newspaper *8-Uhr-Abendblatt* published a typology of German femininity, differentiating between “Gretchen,” “Girl,” and “Garçonne.”¹³ Each type was related to a broader national culture: while “Gretchen” stood for a traditional German womanhood of passive, conformist domesticity, the other two types personified supposedly foreign influences, representing possible futures for German women. The “Garçonne” type, named after a novel by French writer Victor Margueritte that had been translated into German in 1923, personified independent, masculinized, rational femininity.¹⁴ The “Girl”—“sexy but without sizzle, rather coolly calculating,” according to the article’s author—was the epitome of American-style materialism, masked by youthful “sex appeal” and superficial glamor.¹⁵ The Gallic type was the only really progressive model of modern femininity; the American type, although more common, was too “primitive” to offer real inspiration.

Such portrayals of American femininity as a combination of both utmost modernity and primitivism—modern, yet defective—were common in Weimar Germany. The African American dancer Josephine Baker—described as a “fusion of jungle and skyscraper.... Ultramodern and ultraprimitive”—was the most popular icon for this German imagination of American femininity.¹⁶ In his 1925 book *Girlkultur*, the psychologist Fritz Giese juxtaposed photos of the dance troupe “Tiller Girls” with images of “primitive” tribeswomen, calling them the “ancestors of Girl-culture.”¹⁷ Thus, the “Girl” type, although mostly portrayed as a young white woman, combined excessive modernity and materialism with racial otherness, which made it the ultimate symbol for “America” for Giese’s German readers.

In particular, the “Girl” stood for American abundance and prosperity, and in the minds of many Weimar contemporaries the type was closely linked with consumer culture. The flapper, the American equivalent of the Germanized “Girl,” was herself “prosperity’s child,” a product of the booming economy and developing consumer society of 1920s America.¹⁸ These roots were also reflected in the “Girl’s” often unabashed materialism. For example, in 1928 the illustrated magazine *Das Leben* printed a fake marriage advertisement stating: “Fashionable Girl, Charleston dancer, is looking for a smart husband. Character irrelevant but should own a car.”¹⁹ The embodiment of this characteristic of the “Girl” was Lorelei Lee, the air-headed, money-grabbing protagonist of Anita Loos’s 1925 comic novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. The flapper Lorelei travels to Europe to “get educated,” but mostly spends her time spending her suitors’ money on jewelry and expensive drinks. German readers were familiar with this character: after its success in the United States,

¹² Mary Nolan, “‘Housework Made Easy’: The Taylorized Housewife in Weimar Germany’s Rationalized Economy,” *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 3 (1990): 552.

¹³ M. G., “Drei Frauen stehen heute vor uns. Die drei Typen: Gretchen, Girl, Garçonne,” *8-Uhr-Abendblatt*, June 4, 1927. See also Lynne Frame, “Gretchen, Girl, Garçonne? Weimar Science and Popular Culture in Search of the Ideal New Woman,” in *Women in the Metropolis. Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. Katharina von Ankum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 12–40.

¹⁴ Victor Margueritte, *La Garçonne. Sittenroman aus dem heutigen Paris*, trans. Edmund Edel (Berlin: Paul Ehrlich, 1923). For the “Garçonne,” see also Katie Sutton, *The Masculine Woman in Weimar Germany* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 6–7, 25–65; Gesa Kessemeier, *Sportlich, sachlich, männlich. Das Bild der “Neuen Frau” in den Zwanziger Jahren. Zur Konstruktion geschlechtsspezifischer Körperbilder in der Mode der Jahre 1920 bis 1929* (Dortmund: Ebersbach, 2000), 50–62; Sabine Hake, “In the Mirror of Fashion,” in Ankum, *Women in the Metropolis*, 195–96.

¹⁵ Frame, “Gretchen, Girl, Garçonne?,” 12.

¹⁶ Theodore F. Rippey, “Rationalisation, Race, and the Weimar Response to Jazz,” *German Life and Letters* 60, no.1 (2007): 75–97.

¹⁷ Jonathan O. Wipplinger, *The Jazz Republic: Music, Race, and American Culture in Weimar Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 117–18.

¹⁸ Kenneth A. Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child: Some Thoughts on the Flapper,” *American Quarterly* 21, no.1 (1969): 44–64.

¹⁹ “Schickes Girl,” *Das Leben*, December 1928–1929, 15.

the novel was published in serialized form by the German women's magazine *Die Dame* in 1925.²⁰

However, the "Girl" was not only a shorthand for the broader complex of German ideas and images of "America," it also embodied an interpretation of current German society and a construction of a possible German future, in both political and sociocultural terms.²¹ As in many other European countries, the question of what it meant to be female was highly politicized in Germany after 1918. The experience of the breakdown of the old political and social order, the establishment of a democratic republic, and the introduction of female suffrage made women seem like the most prominent representatives of the momentous social, cultural, and political transformations the country had gone through. Thus, the construction of femininity in interwar Germany always had a decidedly political edge: the figure of the "Girl" embodied the democratic changes after 1918 and, for better or worse, served as an example of the behavior and aspirations of a new German generation, who had grown up under this political system. Many contemporary observers used the "Girl" type to raise concerns about a supposed loss of morality and sophistication among young German women. For Giese, for example, the Americanized femininity of the "Girl" represented "pathological after-effects of the war," a hedonistic overreaction to the long years of privation and hardship.²²

The American femininity of the "Girl" was also often linked to broader processes of modernization and rationalization that shaped German interwar society, foreshadowing the highly mechanized and soulless culture that supposedly existed in the United States. According to Siegfried Kracauer, the body culture of Americanized chorus dancers exhibited characteristics of a new machine age, in which individual personality was dissolved in dance movements of mechanical precision: "These products of American distraction factories are no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics."²³ This combination of machine-like movements and sex appeal was often underlined by the performance itself: the "Alfred-Jackson-Girls," for example, imitated a locomotive on stage, with the linked limbs of the dancers acting as moving pistons and gears, while their stomping feet and hissing added the fitting sound effects.²⁴

Criticism of the American model not only came from intellectuals such as Kracauer and Giese. Although many Social Democrats welcomed the promise of prosperity embodied by the United States, they rejected the supposedly malignant aspects of American culture, manifested most prominently in the "Girl" type. The result was "an austere vision of modernity, one which the flamboyant consumerism of the American woman had been safely domesticated."²⁵

²⁰ Helmut Lethen, *Neue Sachlichkeit 1924–32. Studien zur Literatur des "Weißen Sozialismus"* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1970), 35. For the link between consumerism and the "Girl" type, see Weinbaum et al., "The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device," 20–22; Lisa Jaye Young, "Girls and Goods: Amerikanismus and the Tiller-Effekt," in *The New Woman International*, 252–69; Julia Bertschik, *Mode und Moderne. Kleidung als Spiegel des Zeitgeistes in der deutschsprachigen Literatur (1770–1945)* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2005), 198–207; Kerstin Barndt, *Sentiment und Sachlichkeit. Der Roman der Neuen Frau in der Weimarer Republik* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003), 16; Grossmann, "Girlikultur or Thoroughly Rationalized Female," 67–70.

²¹ Rüdiger Graf, "Anticipating the Future in the Present: 'New Women' and Other Beings of the Future in Weimar Germany," *Central European History* 42, no.4 (2009): 647–673, esp. 664.

²² Fritz Giese, *Girlikultur. Vergleiche zwischen amerikanischem und europäischem Rhythmus und Lebensgefühl* (Munich: Delphin, 1925), 17.

²³ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. T. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75–76.

²⁴ For a description of the performance, see "Getanzte Pantomimen," *Scherl's Magazin*, March 1929, 282–83.

²⁵ Nolan, "'Housework Made Easy,'" 552.

The 1930s: The End of the American Dream in Germany

The concerns about American culture that many Germans, despite their fascination, shared with Kracauer and others seemed to be confirmed by the Great Depression. For many Germans, the deep economic crisis that had gripped the United States and that had swept over the Atlantic seemed to expose the country's prosperity and modernity as nothing but a myth—an "*Amerikalegende*."²⁶ In a well-received book published in 1931, economic journalist Ferdinand Friedrich Zimmermann even predicted the "end of capitalism," which was foreshadowed in the economic crisis of the United States.²⁷ American economic principles, he argued, were not suited to German traditions. The disappointment with the American Dream was also evident in newspaper reports detailing the suffering of the millions of unemployed in the former land of plenty.²⁸ In 1932, the journalist Alfred E. Johann published a book about his travels in Depression-era America, reporting on the "bankrupt individualism" of the United States and speculating about the possible rise of communism on the other side of the Atlantic.²⁹ America's economic model now seemed like a bad example for Germany, characterized by rampant capitalism, excessive rationalization, and an overly specialized population. In a review of Johann's book, the journalist Manfred Georg argued that the American economy was based on an "unproductive, predatory capitalism" that had finally been exposed as "the most dangerous and craziest form of economic anarchy."³⁰

With the collapse of the US economy, American femininity lost its allure for many Germans. The "*Girl*" no longer represented utmost modernity and prosperity, but a failed socioeconomic model. In 1931, Kracauer described the "Alfred-Jackson-Girls" as the embodiment of the broken American Dream: this "apparatus" of moving female limbs used to represent the power of American industry and the promise of American prosperity, he argued, and their machine-like dances had conjured up conveyor belts producing an unlimited stream of American-made consumer products. The Great Depression not only put an end to the dream of endless American prosperity, but also in its female messengers: "We don't trust them any longer, those rosy Jackson-Girls!"³¹

In the German press, "*Girl*" archetypes, such as show dancers and models, now no longer embodied modern sex appeal and democratic change, but the economic crisis that seemed to engulf Germany and the rest of the world. In Hollywood, the newspaper *Tempo* reported in 1930, the introduction of sound film and changed tastes had left 5,000 "dance girls" jobless; in Berlin, hundreds of them were unemployed. The situation of the ones who still had a job was not much better because the "oversupply" depressed wages and forced them to accept long hours with little pay.³² The example of a former showgirl, whose skin and health had been ruined by cheap makeup and punishing working hours, exposed the dream of a glamorous career on stage as a fraud.³³ In 1932, "thousands of cute show dancers" were unemployed and "thousands of pretty little things" were queuing at the model agencies, the

²⁶ Egbert Klautke, *Unbegrenzte Möglichkeiten. "Amerikanisierung" in Deutschland und Frankreich, 1900-1933* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2003), 315-24.

²⁷ Ferdinand Fried (i.e., Ferdinand Friedrich Zimmermann), *Das Ende des Kapitalismus* (Jena: Diederichs, 1931). See also Klautke, *Unbegrenzte Möglichkeiten*, 320-21.

²⁸ Alois M. Nagler, "Amerikamüdigkeit," *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 10, 1930; "Eine zerstörte Illusion," *Sozialdemokrat*, March 14, 1931; Yesa Morgan, "Die Melodie von New York," *Tempo*, July 8, 1931; A. W. L., "Brief eines U.S.A.-Arbeitslosen," *Tempo*, May 27, 1931.

²⁹ A. E. Johann, *Amerika. Untergang am Überfluss* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1932).

³⁰ Manfred Georg, "Untergang am Überfluss," *Tempo*, August 2, 1932.

³¹ Siegfried Kracauer, "Girls und Krise," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, May 27, 1931. See also Sabine Hake, "Girls and Crisis—The Other Side of Diversion," *New German Critique*, no. 40 (1987): 147-64; Klautke, *Unbegrenzte Möglichkeiten*, 317-18.

³² Ps., "SOS: Girls in Not!" *Tempo*, October 8, 1930; "8 Girls 15 Mark," *Tempo*, October 22, 1930; "Elendes Leben oder: Krach in der Damenkapelle," *Tempo*, August 1, 1931.

³³ E. Th., "Nummernmädchen-Tragödie," *Tempo*, November 8, 1930.

illustrated magazine *Das Leben* reported.³⁴ In the same year, *Der Querschnitt* decreed that the term “*Girl*,” together with “sex appeal” and the bob haircut, were outdated.³⁵

The *Junge Mädchen*: A New German Femininity?

By the 1930s, the “*Girl*” as a symbol of Americanized femininity had all but vanished from German culture. The type of modern German femininity that took her place was the “*junge Mädchen*” (young girl), a more wholesome, Germanized image of modern femininity more fitting to a harsh economic climate than the hedonistic flapper. Already in 1930, the illustrated magazine *Scherl’s Magazin* by the right-wing Scherl Verlag published a special report about “the young girl of today,” in which young women talked about their experiences in work and private life in a deteriorating economy.³⁶ Their view of their own generation was characterized by “*Sachlichkeit*” (objectivity) and modernity mixed with a worldly wise adaptation to the constraints of the world of the early 1930s. The accompanying illustrations showed female types that are now mostly associated with Nazi aesthetics: one photo showed a row of marching female athletes in matching outfits titled “sport creates a united fighting front.” Another photo depicted a female athlete wielding a javelin, which the caption introduced as the “real girl type of our time: healthy in body and spirit.” See [Figure 2](#). Although the focus on physical and mental health set her apart from the subversive “*Girl*” type, however, the woman in the photo still retained some of her glamorous features, namely a bob haircut and high-heeled shoes. Rather than replacing the “*Girl*” the “*junge Mädchen*” here appeared as an evolutionary step in the development of womanhood.

Right-wing publications were not the only ones constructing the idea of the “*junge Mädchen*” as the new embodiment of German womanhood. In 1932, the leftist writer Axel Eggebrecht and photographer Hedda Walther published the book *Junge Mädchen* (*Young Girls*), which documented the rise of a new type of modern German femininity. The American “cult of the *Girl*” was a product of a puritanical education, a “one-dimensional industrialization of language” and a vague memory of the scarcity of women during the pioneer era in that country, according to Eggebrecht.³⁷ The outcome was a figure “smooth as if out of a soap commercial, clever, absolutely phony and always ready to mercilessly abuse her power over men” that had become a model for women from Slovakia to China. Now, however, this creature of artificial beauty was confronted all over the world with the organic growth of “the real, the truly new girl.”³⁸

The book described this new type of femininity as characterized by simplicity, straightforwardness, modesty, practicality and “cool calmness.”³⁹ The ideals and desires of this new type had changed with the floundering economy of the 1930s: a comfortable domestic life in marriage rather than an exciting and glamorous life on stage was what young German women now aspired to. Signs of this change were a new culture of warmth and cordiality and, most significantly, the return of long hair: “School girls, we hear, have secretly vowed to grow their hair again, just like their older sisters ten years ago vowed to get a bob haircut without asking for Father’s permission.”⁴⁰

However, the fall of the “*Girl*” and the rise of the *Junge Mädchen* was not a straightforward return to prewar femininity, Eggebrecht argued. This new femininity was still a very modern phenomenon: young women’s affinity to sport and outdoor activities had changed their anatomy and their character, and they were rooted in the city and in urban environments. Their sexuality was not constrained by traditional morality, and they had more

³⁴ C. Till, “Chor-Tänzerinnen haben’s nicht leicht,” *Das Leben*, September 1932, 54.

³⁵ “Worte von gestern,” *Der Querschnitt*, April 1932, 92.

³⁶ Ilse Reicke, “Das junge Mädchen von heute,” *Scherl’s Magazin*, June 1930, 575–88.

³⁷ Axel Eggebrecht, *Junge Mädchen* (Berlin: Reimer, 1932), 121–22.

³⁸ Eggebrecht, *Junge Mädchen*, 122.

³⁹ Eggebrecht, *Junge Mädchen*, 10.

⁴⁰ Eggebrecht, *Junge Mädchen*, 70.



Figure 2. Photograph titled “A Real Girl Type of Our Time: Healthy in Body and Spirit,” *Scherl’s Magazin*, June 1930, p. 581.

opportunities for “erotic experiences and insights.”⁴¹ Most significantly, the young women of today were comfortable with new technology: “We can praise our young girls as exemplary products of our era. They are model pupils of technology. Even before they learn the alphabet, they know the license plates of cars. They are clean and hygienic. Flawless models, with high-grade practicality.”⁴² This is why the proletarian girl was more

⁴¹ Eggebrecht, *Junge Mädchen*, 142.

⁴² Eggebrecht, *Junge Mädchen*, 135.

representative of this type than the middle-class girl; for Eggebrecht, who had been a member of the Communist Party and had visited Soviet Russia, the young Russian woman was the counterimage to the “fading illusion of the smooth *Girl* creature”—an honest activist, dedicated to the physical and ideological building of a communist society.⁴³ Between these extremes, he argued, all young women in the world, including in Germany, were negotiating their particular path.

According to Eggebrecht, despite all their affinity to sport and technology, these “young girls with 100 horsepower” were still normal teenagers, susceptible to feminine emotions like lovesickness or the idolizing of celebrities. This, however, did not make them weak—on the contrary, because their swooning was switched on and off on their own volition, it made them even more powerful: “They might be machine people (*Maschinenmenschen*), but they ultimately are in control of the switchboard of their own apparatus. Their fearless eyes, their independent brain, their toned musculature can still be connected, if need be, to the age-old, hard-wearing motor of the heart. A more effective model has not yet been put on the market.”⁴⁴ Although Eggebrecht’s description had a humorous and, at times, condescending tone, he still painted a picture of emotionally independent, strong, and dynamic young women that were clearly presented as role models. Despite positioning them as the opposite of the “*Girl*” type, however, his description was still informed by many aspects of 1920s femininity, such as machine metaphors and ideas of materialism.

Eggebrecht’s observations were echoed by other publications from the same year. *Der Querschnitt*, for example, dedicated a whole issue to “young girls today” in 1932, also focusing on sport and technology as the defining features of modern femininity. Women of the time were described as “straightforward and strong as resting machines” and as equally at home on the golf course as in a racing car.⁴⁵ The *Süddeutsche Monatshefte* published a special issue on the topic, in which the “young girls of today” were depicted as sober professionals who enjoyed the rights and freedoms women had won after the First World War, but also suffered under the constraints and pressures the deteriorating economy put on them in their work and private lives. Their most important characteristics were defined as independence and a more relaxed relationship to men, on the one hand, modesty and self-limitation, on the other.⁴⁶

The new female type of the “*junge Mädchen*” was presented as a universal category transcending boundaries of class or, in Eggebrecht’s case, as proletarianized. However, there were many characteristics, such as an affinity to competitive, bourgeois sports such as golf or field hockey, that clearly marked this figure as middle-class. Siegfried Kracauer addressed this directly in his contribution to *Der Querschnitt*’s special issue on the *junge Mädchen*, stressing that most working-class girls neither had the funds nor the time to practice sports or for the teenage crushes Eggebrecht had described: “The usual daydreams about boys (*Schwärmerei*) associated with bourgeois adolescent girls is completely alien to young female workers, because they already have to practice a disenchanting eroticism just to be able to bear their life at home and in the factory.”⁴⁷

Five years later, *Der Querschnitt* declared the *junge Mädchen* as the representative type of the 1930s. This new type of femininity that had replaced the American “*Girl*” was a fusion of technological modernity and qualities that were traditionally attributed to women, such as motherliness, domesticity, and emotionality. In the same issue, the journal completed the expunging of the Americanized “*Girl*” from the German imagination by simply redefining this “arguably most famous female type in the world” as a young British upper-class

⁴³ Eggebrecht, *Junge Mädchen*, 125.

⁴⁴ Eggebrecht, *Junge Mädchen*, 136.

⁴⁵ Emmanuel Berl, “Die Anbetung der Jungfrau,” *Der Querschnitt*, April 1932, 233–34.

⁴⁶ Helene Raff, “Das junge Mädchen von einst und heute,” *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*, January 1932, 263–69.

⁴⁷ Siegfried Kracauer, “Mädchen im Beruf,” *Der Querschnitt*, April 1932, 238–43.

female—fresh-faced, virginal, athletic.⁴⁸ It is remarkable how little this image of modern femininity from 1936, three years after Hitler's appointment as chancellor, differed from the descriptions from the early 1930s discussed previously. In this respect, 1933 hardly seems to have made a difference. An embodiment of this continuity was Elly Beinhorn, a female aviator who rose to fame in 1931 after successfully completing a return flight to Bissau in western Africa, going on to have a successful career in Nazi Germany. In the German media, she was described as “bronzed [and] dashing” and “simple, young and slim”; a technophile, modest, and practical girl who still embraced her femininity by always making sure to take an elegant evening dress on her adventures.⁴⁹

A New American Femininity for the 1930s and Its German Reception

In the United States, a similar development had taken place. The flapper type of the 1920s, which had been an important influence on German ideas of the “*Girl*,” also did not survive the harsher climate of the 1930s. Already in 1929, *Harpers Magazine* prophesized that in these changed times “women of the new era” would turn away from “the modern ‘flapper’ ... [who] drifts along, directed by her whims and her impressions into a pattern of life which, though innocuous, is mainly negative.”⁵⁰ At the high point of the Great Depression, the rejection of 1920s femininity became even more pronounced. In 1931, *Scribner's Magazine* announced that “in the general depression, the stock of the flapper has also touched a new low for the post-war period.”⁵¹ In the same year, the fashion magazine *Delineator* was at pains to point out that a new “youthful” jacket it presented in its March issue was “in no sense a ‘flapper’ frock”—juxtaposing youthfulness with the 1920s type.⁵² The economic breakdown, which had sparked a social, political, and cultural crisis, had “made the cocktail-drinking, cigarette-smoking, Charleston-dancing flapper an unaffordable excess.”⁵³ In Depression-era America, sober and modest young women took the irresponsible flapper's place and women's fashion became more “feminine” again, which was “paralleled and facilitated by a retreat to the traditional family unit.”⁵⁴ Just like in Weimar Germany's *Doppelverdiener* debate, women were attacked for working in salaried jobs at a time when many men were unemployed and were urged to focus on traditionally female roles such as housewife and mother.⁵⁵

This conservatism was mirrored on the silver screen: the so-called Motion Picture Production Code, strictly enforced from 1934, put narrow boundaries on the content of films and the off-screen behavior of movie stars. As Susan Ware argues, the conservative morality of the production code in fact freed female film stars from roles that bound them to sexuality and eroticism.⁵⁶ As a consequence, however, female roles often were subservient to the leading male character. According to Julie Human, a typical example is *A Woman Rebels* from 1936, in which Katherine Hepburn's heroine, despite all self-confidence and independence, surrenders to the male lead in the end. In the final scene, “the male lead tells his female costar, ‘You know ... these modern women are so weak.’ She demurely responds, ‘Aren't they?’ and then melts into his embrace.”⁵⁷ This emotional dependency on

⁴⁸ Irene Seligo, “Das Girl,” *Der Querschnitt*, May 1936, 259.

⁴⁹ Ellen Ly., “Das Mädchen, das um den Erdball flog: Elly Beinhorn,” *Hamburger Anzeiger*, June 9, 1933; “Asien lässt grüssen ... Zu Elly Beinhorns Flug,” *Hamburger Anzeiger*, August 14, 1935.

⁵⁰ Floyd Allport, “Seeing Women as They Are,” *Harpers Magazine*, March 1929, 397–408, esp. 408.

⁵¹ Christian Gauss, “The New Morality in the Colleges,” *Scribner's Magazine*, November 1931, 525–32, esp. 530.

⁵² “Smart on the Larger Figure,” *Delineator*, March 1931, 109.

⁵³ Joshua Zeitz, *Flapper: A Madcap Story of Sex, Style, Celebrity, and the Women Who Made America Modern* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2006), 279.

⁵⁴ Yellis, “Prosperity's Child,” 64.

⁵⁵ Alice Kessler-Harris, “Gender Ideology in Historical Reconstruction: A Case Study from the 1930s,” *Gender & History* 1, no. 1 (1989): 31–49.

⁵⁶ Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 183.

⁵⁷ Julie Human, “A Woman Rebels? Gender Roles in 1930s Motion Pictures,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 98, no. 4 (2000): 405.

men differed remarkably from the flapper type embodied by Loos's Lorelei Lee, who treated men mainly as means to secure a glamorous lifestyle.

The change in women's representation in 1930s America toward a more demure, motherly type is also evident in advertisements for beauty products. A good example is the Palmolive soap brand. In the 1920s, the advertisements often featured flapper types, wearing the bob haircut and glamorous, revealing clothing, who were described as "the girl you stop to look at" or "the prettiest girl in her set."⁵⁸ The soap itself was praised for helping a woman to "keep that schoolgirl complexion" that gave her beauty, attractiveness, and charm. In other examples, the company addressed women as clever, materialistic "business girls," who knew that "beauty is rated a dollars-and-cents asset."⁵⁹ After 1930, the characterization changed toward more motherly figures, shown in more conservative clothing together with their offspring. Women were addressed as caring mothers and were urged to buy the soap "for baby and yourself, both."⁶⁰ The soap now promised "natural, wholesome care" that protected "your beauty, as well as baby's."⁶¹ See Figure 3. The emotional dependency and focus on motherliness reflected in American depictions of Depression-era femininity clearly set it apart from the independent *junge Mädchen* in Germany.

Just like the *junge Mädchen*, however, the new feminine ideal of 1930s America was not seen as a retreat into the past but as something new and modern. *Scribner's Magazine* argued in 1931 that "although through with the excess of the Jazz Age, let no one suppose that American youth has returned to the ways of its fathers."⁶² In 1935, *Good Housekeeping* magazine, in discussing the new, more feminine fashion of the period, argued that "woman once again, although she flies a plane or runs a motor, goes back to feminine wiles and furbelows; but she remains attuned in action to a swiftly moving world in which she plays an ever increasing part in the affairs of men."⁶³ Just like in Germany, instead of the bob-headed, saucy flapper, a fusion of modern body culture and technology—and aviation in particular—with a more modest and sober personality seemed to be the fitting reflection of the time. Ware argues that pioneers like Amelia Earhart, the first female aviator to fly solo across the Atlantic, and female sport stars like Babe Didrikson represented the "popular athletic heroine of the 1930s," who combined these qualities.⁶⁴ Writing in 1929, the journalist Vera L. Connolly claimed that "daughters of the sky" such as Earhart were the new idols of the youth.⁶⁵ In the same year, the *North American Review* remarked on the "sudden rush of women to the cockpits."⁶⁶ Operating an airplane became a symbolic activity for 1930s femininity, with the reserved and retiring Earhart becoming the embodiment of an international trend toward a modest, yet modern feminine type. As Kristen Lubben points out, her body "indicated mobility and a streamlined machine-age aesthetic," while her involvement in aviation made her a "heroic symbol of modernism."⁶⁷ However, she also was chosen for her career-defining flight because of her modesty and wholesomeness. The American press constantly emphasized her "modest and fair-minded" personality and described her as "direct, unpretentious, hard-working."⁶⁸ The fusion of modern technology and traditionally female-connnotated traits embodied by Earhart seemed more representative of American femininity than 1920s flapper

⁵⁸ "The Girl You Stop to Look At," Palmolive Company, 1921, Duke University AdAccess collection (DUAA), BH1214; "The Prettiest Girl in Her Set," Palmolive Company, 1925, DUAA, BH1224.

⁵⁹ "The Business Girl Knows," Palmolive Company, 1928, DUAA, BH1018.

⁶⁰ "Now I'm Schoolgirl Complexion All Over," Palmolive Company, 1933, DUAA, BH1032.

⁶¹ "You Darling, You! The World Adores That Peach-Bloom Skin," Palmolive Company, 1933, DUAA, BH1254.

⁶² Gauss, "The New Morality in the Colleges," 525.

⁶³ Helen Koues, "Fashion, the Reflector of the Times," *Good Housekeeping*, May 1935, 63.

⁶⁴ Ware, *Holding Their Own*, 173.

⁶⁵ Vera L. Connolly, "Daughters of the Sky (1929)," in *The American New Woman Revisited. A Reader, 1894-1930*, ed. Martha H. Patterson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 274-76.

⁶⁶ Bruce Gould, "Milady Takes the Air," *North American Review*, December 1929, 691-97, esp. 691.

⁶⁷ Kristen Lubben, "A New American Ideal: Photography and Amelia Earhart," in *The New Woman International*, 293.

⁶⁸ Gould, "Milady Takes the Air," 694; "The Search for Amelia Earhart," *The Nation*, July 17, 1937.

You darling, you!

THE WORLD ADORES
THAT PEACH-BLOOM SKIN



"OLIVE OIL IN SOAP"
say doctors, "to keep skin lovely!"

YOU darling, you! With your velvety, petal-smooth skin! For beauty's sake, let's hope mother knows how to keep that skin of yours enchanting as the years go by.

When you were a tiny baby, olive oil was the doctor's prescription for your sensitive skin. And, of course, he prescribed an "olive oil soap." Because such a soap is infinitely kind to tender skin.

Palmolive is made from a blend of olive and palm oils—a secret *blend* which has made it the ideal beauty soap for all types of skin.

Olive oil—nothing else—gives it that soft, olive-green color, a color that assures you of natural purity and safety. Olive oil, too, gives

Palmolive a velvety lather, which gently penetrates the tiny pores, freeing them of accumulations easily... leaving skin soft, smooth, gloriously clear and fresh.

Mother, buy three cakes today. Start tonight—to use this 2-minute treatment, for yourself and baby, both: massage Palmolive's soothing lather well into those tiny pores. Rinse with warm water, then with cold. You'll soon discover that "schoolgirl complexions" depend on natural, wholesome care. And your beauty, as well as baby's, will be protected by Palmolive—the soap of youth.

P. S. Are you schoolgirl complexion all over? Use Palmolive for the bath, too.

This much olive oil goes into the making of every cake of Palmolive.



PALMOLIVE ... the soap of Youth




Figure 3. Palmolive soap commercial, 1933.

girls: "Although Earhart's popularity stems from the same fascination with the image of an unfettered modern woman that fueled interest in iconic 1920s characters such as those embodied by the film star Louise Brooks, it is also a rejection of the symbol and narrative of the dissipated flapper."⁶⁹ Indeed, restraint, athleticism, and affinity with technology had never been the hallmarks of Lorelei Lee.

The rejection of the Americanized "Girl" type in 1930s Germany was a reflection of the fall of "America" as a model for modernity. The *junge Mädchen* seemed to be a home-grown version of modern femininity that promised to combine modern-ness with traditionally "feminine" qualities. However, this change did not mean that the intense interaction with American culture in Germany—particularly when it came to representations of modern femininity—had ended. The type of American femininity embodied by Earhart—characterized by earnestness and affinity to technology, just like the *junge Mädchen* of Germany—was still acceptable in 1930s Germany: in 1932, *UHU*, the biggest illustrated magazine in Germany,

⁶⁹ Lubben, "A New American Ideal," 296.



**„Bitte,
lieber Papa,
laß
mich
fliegen ...“**

**Das Luft-Girl,
ein neuer
Modetyp**

Von
Ernst Schäffer

... Sie (die Frauen) haben in flotten Schwünge einer Welt gezeigt, daß das Fliegen ja gar keine so große Kunst und gar nicht so gefährlich ist. ...
Hauptmann Dr. h. c. Hermann Köhl

Einheitliche Feststellung: in allen Ländern der bewohnten Erde — bis zu den Indianer-Reservaten der Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika — drängen sich die Frauen seit einigen Jahren zum Fliegen. Und eine weitere Feststellung: sie haben auf den verschiedenen, ja beinahe auf allen Gebieten der Fliegerei wesentliche Erfolge aufzuweisen. Es ist

P. & A.

„Papa hat's erlaubt“
Elinor Smith, eins der zahllosen jungen Mädchen, die, mit einem Flugzeug und viel Courage ausgerüstet, die Luft über dem amerikanischen Kontinent unsicher machen.
Sie flog einen Dauerrekord.

8

Figure 4. A photograph of Elinor Smith posing in front of an aeroplane, captioned “Dad allowed it,” *UHU*, July 1932, p. 8.

announced a “new fashion type”—the “*Luft-Girl*” (air girl).⁷⁰ See Figure 4. The article praised the achievements of female flyers but disparaged the sensationalist reporting of women’s involvement in this sport. Such a frivolous approach to aviation, the author argued, only undermined the earnest contributions by such pioneers as Amelia Earhart or Elinor Smith. However, even the achievements of these American aviators were framed not as accomplishments equal to those of male flyers, but as a girlish hobby, pursued only with Father’s permission. The accompanying fashion photo of Elinor Smith wearing a trouser suit and jewelry—rather than her flying gear—emphasized this condescending description

⁷⁰ Ernst Schäffer, “‘Bitte, lieber Papa, lass mich fliegen ...’ Das Luft-Girl, ein neuer Modetyp,” *UHU*, July 1932, 8.

that echoed Eggebrecht's view of the *junge Mädchen*. In this way, the modernity of Earhart and the other female pioneers presented in the article was tamed to make them acceptable to a German readership.

Conclusion

Katherine Hepburn's rebellious woman who wishes for nothing more than a strong man, Amelia Earhart's American wholesomeness, and Elly Beinhorn's feminine practicality all reflected a changed image of womanhood in the 1930s. On both sides of the Atlantic, this image sought to save some of the modernity and dynamism of the 1920s flapper and to fuse them with a less controversial, more modest, and conservative outlook. As this article has shown, this means that the construction of femininity in 1930s Germany was not a strictly national phenomenon. It was part of a broad transnational trend and at least in some respects still looked to "America" for inspiration, despite the disillusionment with American culture that had set in after the Great Depression. To be sure, some aspects did not translate easily from the American context. Most significantly, despite Eggebrecht's allusions to Soviet femininity, the *junge Mädchen* archetype was in many respects a middle-class ideal and was deeply influenced by German bourgeois traditions that did not exist in the same form in the United States. At the same time, it built on existing working-class interpretations of modern German femininity, such as the efficient housewife popularized by Social Democrats.⁷¹

Despite such important differences, the similarities in the transatlantic constructions of femininity in the 1930s are significant. The modesty, sincerity, and earnestness that featured in both American and German femininity, replacing the frivolousness of the flapper and the "Girl," point toward shared experiences of deprivation and crisis. The shared focus on high technology—and on aviation in particular—meant that it could easily be integrated into the different conceptions of modernity developing on both sides of the Atlantic. These findings suggest the need for a reappraisal of and a new perspective on constructions of femininity in Nazi Germany and on German culture of the 1930s more generally.

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⁷¹ Nolan, "Housework Made Easy," 552–65.

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