

Midwives in the “Biopolitical Laboratory” of the “Reich District Wartheland”— Obstetrics between Privacy and Government Intervention

Cooperating and funding institutions:

The research project “Midwives in the ‘Biopolitical Laboratory’ of the ‘Reich District Wartheland’” is funded by the DFG and associated with the research project “Privacy during National Socialism” (Das Private im Nationalsozialismus) of the Institut für Zeitgeschichte Munich in cooperation with Prof. Dr. Elizabeth Harvey (University of Nottingham) and the German Historical Institute Warsaw, funded by the Leibniz Gesellschaft. A postdoctoral stipend funded by the German Historical Institute Warsaw in 2012 and 2013 allowed pre studies and first findings of archival sources.

Abstract

The impact of National Socialist Germanization policy and biopolitics in the occupied and annexed areas of Poland as well as the tension between privacy and government intervention in the female action space of pregnancy and birth are more palpable in the sphere of activity of midwives than in hardly any other profession. Midwives worked at the interface between biopolitics and the individual biographical turning points of pregnancy, birth, and early parenthood. With the introduction of the mandatory enlistment of a midwife for every birth (1938), the National Socialist state monopolized the activity of midwives, reinforcing their position as experts for obstetrics. At the same time, the NS-state established a different status of midwives according to their “racial classification”: While the state protected German midwives, “non ethnic German” midwives were deprived of their rights. National Socialist Germanization policy and the varying meaning of motherhood in terms of “ethnic membership” redefined the roles, capacities and performance of German, Polish, and Jewish midwives as well as their relationship to government authorities and their clientele.

The focus will be placed on the various levels of planning, administration, and concrete implementation as well as the public and individual perception of the activity of midwives in occupied Poland using the example of the “Reich district Wartheland” as the most important “parade ground” for Germanization policy. Gender-specific implementations of Germanization policy and biopolitics, including their impact on everyday practices, from the dual perspective of rulers and the ruled will be investigated.