German History in Documents and Images

Volume 10. One Germany in Europe, 1989 – 2009
Mothers, Careers, and Parental Leave (April 23, 2006)

This article by an American journalist focuses on Minister for Family Affairs Ursula von der Leyen (CDU), physician and mother of seven. It describes the difficulties involved in combining motherhood and career in Germany and discusses the parental leave allowance proposed by the minister. Parental leave support aimed to provide families with financial assistance and to promote the compatibility of family and career.

Quoth the Raven: I Bake Cookies, Too

Surely Germany, cradle of the kindergarten and home to some of the world's most generous maternity-leave policies, would do everything it could to make life easier for mothers who work, right?

Well, no. Few developed countries are more resistant to the idea of working mothers, and the hostility can be summed up in one word: Rabenmutter.

It means raven mother, and refers to women who leave their children in an empty nest while they fly away to pursue a career. The phrase, which sounds like something out of the Brothers Grimm, has been used by Germans for centuries as a synonym for bad parent. Today, it is at the center of a new debate on the future of the German working woman, prompted by the first woman to lead the country, Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Mrs. Merkel herself, a physicist and career politician, has no children, making her typical of her generation of German professional women. But she has appointed Ursula von der Leyen, a physician and mother of seven, as minister for family affairs.

Dr. von der Leyen has taken it on herself to challenge some deeply held, if only whispered, prejudices in German society, chief among them that women must choose either to work or to raise children.

To her critics, many of whom belong to her own conservative Christian Democratic Party, Dr. von der Leyen is Germany's latest incarnation of the Rabenmutter – a driven creature determined to impose her own superhuman lifestyle on women who can neither deal with it nor afford it.

Never mind that people who study ravens say these birds are quite attentive mothers. Or that Dr. von der Leyen isn't even raven-haired (her casually styled hair is blond). What upsets her critics is that she is unapologetic about her message. "The question is not whether women will work," she said in an interview. "They will work. The question is whether they will have kids."

Germany, she says, must make it easier for women to do both, because it now has one of the lowest birthrates in the world. The number of children born here in 2005 was the lowest in a single year since 1945. If the trend holds, the population will decline 17 percent by 2050 – hobbling the economy and an already-strained social system.

Immigration can solve only part of the problem. Even if Germany's annual influx of immigrants were to double to 200,000, the population would still shrink 8.5 percent by 2050. And Germany already struggles to absorb the current waves of Turks and others.

The answer, Dr. von der Leyen argues, is to rewrite Germany's family policies. While they offer relatively generous payments and benefits, like two years of parental leave support, they help force women into a long-term choice between work and family.

Kindergartens and child-care centers close at noon, and most state-run schools by 1 p.m. Mothers without helpful parents or the budget for a nanny are stuck.

The French government, by contrast, supports an extensive network of day-care and after-school centers, many open until 6 p.m.

Social attitudes only deepen the problems. While the law entitles men to paid family leave, few take it, fearing it will cripple their careers. Yet women who work while rearing children meet disapproval from colleagues and bosses. On a recent television talk show, the male host showed Dr. von der Leyen a fictitious newspaper front page, with a smiling photo of her and a headline, "Mama, Where Were You When I Was Small?"

"In the day-to-day life of a working woman, the Rabenmutter is still very much alive," said Martin Werding, a family policy expert at the Ifo Institute of Economic Research in Munich. As Dr. von der Leyen put it, "The bad conscience will kill you."

Rather than vault the hurdles and shoulder the guilt, many German women skip having children. In 2005, 42 percent of those with academic careers were childless. That is double the percentage in France, which has one of Europe's highest birthrates.

Dr. von der Leyen, 47, traces her determination to work and have children to encouragement she received in the 1990's while working at Stanford University. Her bosses, she said, were impressed by her ability to juggle a job and a household. In Germany, by contrast, a boss who heard she was expecting a third child told her she would have too little energy to work.

Dr. von der Leyen says she now wants to combine the flexible child care of France with the financial incentives of Sweden. Her main proposal, adapted from Sweden, is to shorten parental leave support in Germany to 12 months, but tie payments – up to $2,200 a month – to income. Higher-income families would have more incentive to have babies, while the shorter duration would prod mothers to return to work sooner.

She would also require fathers to take at least two months off work, if a family is to receive the full 12 months of benefits, to pressure men to take more responsibility.

That provision has particularly rankled conservatives in the Christian Democratic Party, which governs Germany in a grand coalition with the Social Democrats.

Some of that is old-fashioned gender politics: Many Christian Democrats, like conservatives in most places, champion traditional families, with a working father and a homemaking mother. But Germany's particular history also raises emotions in the debate, sometimes in contradictory ways. The Nazis were the last enthusiastic practitioners of family policy in Germany, a fact that has made people here queasy about any repopulation schemes. But the Nazis also celebrated the stay-at-home mother, a fact that Dr. von der Leyen's supporters cite.

"The thinking that mothers should look after children and men should go out and support the family is a product of our dark past," said Reiner Klingholz, director of the Berlin Institute for Population and Development. "It's still in the minds of people, even if they sound liberal or progressive."