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Of Fernweh and Fleabites: German Female Journalists in Pursuit of Adventure, 1937–1942

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Abstract

This article opens up new perspectives on gendered experiences of the Nazi era by exploring three individual women as case studies for subjective interpretations of German nationalism and modernity in the late 1930s and early 1940s. It focuses on Liselotte Purper, Ilse Steinhoff, and Margret Boveri, all of them journalists and photographers from Germany who sought adventure abroad and published books and articles about their trips back home. They were independent, hardworking, and pro-Nazi regime, though their professional and political principles played out differently. In tracing how these three women navigated and narrated their international journeys, I highlight that their quest for adventure, like those of others with a similar propensity for travel, involved primarily the pursuit of independence, individuality, and historical relevance. The range of their experiences and interpretations further draws attention to the complex relationship between collective identity and individual subjectivity under Nazism.

Keywords: gender; subjectivity; travel; journalism; Nazi Germany

Introduction

At the age of ten, Liselotte Purper received a book from her parents. *Hertas Beruf* told the story of a woman who worked as a professional photographer and awakened in its young reader an intense ambition, who from that moment yearned for a career behind the camera.¹ By 1937, Purper had concluded her apprenticeship in photography with the highest marks and was embarking on her first professional trips to East Prussia and Pomerania, where she took photographs for *Frauenkultur*, a magazine affiliated with the *Deutsches Frauenwerk*.² Photography soon became indistinguishable from travel and adventure.³ She roamed all across the European continent with her camera in tow. German military victories after the outbreak of World War II initially served to expand her geographic reach further, and she traveled to occupied Norway, Ukraine, and France on commission, to name some examples. In 1942, now a well-established freelance photojournalist, she felt at the height of professional success. She had hired assistants to help her keep up with the flood of orders, had photographed

¹ *Hertas Beruf* was written by Ilse-Dore Tanner and formed part of the *Kränzchen-Bibliothek* series. Compare Katja Protte, “Bildberichterstatlerin” im “Dritten Reich”—Fotografien aus den Jahren 1937 bis 1944 von Liselotte Purper, *DHM Magazin*, vol. 20 (Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum, 1997), 3.

² The *Deutsches Frauenwerk* (German Women’s Enterprise) was a combine that, in the context of *Gleichschaltung* (or coordination), served as a structured organization for women’s associations and women’s groups to join and be subordinate to. It published a magazine *Frauenkultur im Deutschen Frauenwerk* between 1935 and 1941. Jill Stephenson, *The Nazi Organisation of Women* (London: Routledge, 1981), 17–19, 130–46.

³ Protte, “Bildberichterstatlerin” im “Dritten Reich,” 4–5, 9.

prominent figures ranging from Magda Goebbels playing hostess in Berlin to the Romanian dictator Ion Antonescu in his garden, and she had been specially honored for her collaborative work with the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* (Reich Labor Service).⁴ “This is how my fame grows, I tell you, I cannot help it,” Purper reported to her boyfriend, Kurt Orgel, who was stationed on the eastern front. “By all appearances I seem to be reaching the very top.”⁵

Liselotte Purper’s professional ambition and her desire to travel widely set her apart but did not make her unique. She was far from the only German woman to realize her journalistic and adventurous aspirations in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In this article, I want to look at how Liselotte Purper and her peers narrated their international journeys, navigating the tensions between the image of the modern professional woman as an intrepid female adventurer, on the one hand, and the complexities of her inimitable experience, on the other. Because this depends on considering their subjectivity, I will limit myself to looking at three women as individual case studies, namely the photojournalist Ilse Steinhoff (1909–1974), the foreign correspondent Margret Boveri (1900–1975), and, introduced previously, Liselotte Purper (1912–2002). All three were independent, hardworking, and pro-regime, though their professional and political principles played out differently. In tracing how they navigated and narrated their international journeys, I highlight that their quest for adventure, like those of other women with a similar propensity for travel, also involved the pursuit of independence, individuality, and historical relevance in an era still colored by the legacy of Weimar’s *Neue Frau*.

That Purper began dreaming of a career in photography after her encounter with a relatable fictional character and inspirational plotline is no small matter. One of the central themes this article explores is how people were shaped by emerging narratives of independent womanhood and how they reaffirmed such cultural constructions in their own right.⁶ The courageous heroine of the 1930s and 1940s ventured forth into the unknown with a camera or typewriter in her luggage so she might later share her experiences with a wider readership, thus not only traveling abroad as a female adventurer but also inhabiting and publicizing that role at home.⁷ At the same time, to see in women such as Purper, Steinhoff, and Boveri merely the lived embodiment of newly accessible cultural identities like that of female adventurer or woman journalist flattens out their personalities as well as individual choices and constraints in order to present them as manifestations of a broader cultural moment. Instead, I am particularly interested in how they each shaped narratives of adventure to suit their desires, and the extent to which their personal, very physical experiences were in turn shaped by the discourses they were immersed in. I place the adventure stories that these three women lived not only within their wider historical context but, more importantly, also within the context of each woman’s individual life trajectory. In doing so I seek to underline an important and definitively modern dynamic by which collective frames of belonging were paradoxically dependent on their explicit and subjective reinterpretation

⁴ The *Reichsarbeitsdienst* was a state organization and component of the National Socialist economy. Beginning in 1935 all young men were required to complete six months of compulsory labor; in 1939 this was extended to include young women as well. Usually, the work was on civil engineering projects or in agriculture.

⁵ Deutsches Historisches Museum (DHM), Berlin, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1849, Liselotte Purper, “Letter to Kurt Orgel, Berlin,” October 2, 1942. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

⁶ For an analytically related engagement of subjectivity, wherein the connections between cultural media and individual experiences are speculatively probed, here in the context of Nazi ideology and personal photograph albums, see Maiken Umbach, “Selfhood, Place, and Ideology in German Photo Albums, 1933–1945,” *Central European History* 48 (2015): 335–65.

⁷ On the history of independent female travel and travel writing, compare Karen Lawrence, *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 111–56; and Susan Bassnett, “Travel Writing and Gender,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 225–41.

at the level of the individual.⁸ This was true also of each woman's political relationship to Nazism, which differed markedly even though they all three conformed to the regime.

Caught in the grip of *Fernweh*—the desire to go out and discover the world for themselves—the women who voyaged into foreign spaces did so with purpose. Ilse Steinhoff was considered to be an expert photographer of the African continent. She traveled through the former German colonies of South West and East Africa in 1937 and published *Deutsche Heimat in Afrika*, a photograph album of her trip, in 1939.⁹ Meanwhile, in 1938, Margret Boveri undertook a lengthy trip to the Middle East in order to verify her journalistic acumen to her editor. The three-month-long journey took her from Istanbul through Beirut and Baghdad to Tehran and back again, and she wrote articles for the German newspaper *Frankfurter Zeitung* throughout. After her return to Germany, she also published a book narrating the adventurous trip with the Swiss-based Atlantis Press, which specialized in travel writing.¹⁰ Finally, in late October 1940, Liselotte Purper embarked on one of several adventures to the Balkans, where she spent five weeks with a group of ethnic Germans to document their journey up the Danube from Dobruja as part of a large-scale Nazi colonial resettlement program.¹¹

These are just a small selection of the various adventures the three women experienced over the course of their careers, and it is no surprise they have each already garnered scholarly interest elsewhere, whether they were looking for lions on safari in South West Africa, camping beneath lustrous Anatolian skies, or steaming up the Danube in a riverboat.¹² Moreover, Liselotte Purper, Ilse Steinhoff, and Margret Boveri were not so much pioneers as they were trendsetters. This article investigates how they encountered and reshaped their adventurous individual selves, first by discussing the role of technology as a heroic emblem of modernity and then by delving into the three women's flexible interpretations of femininity and national identity.

Before the 1920s, so few European women escaped the dominant gendered norms of their time that those who did so were immediately exceptional.¹³ By the 1930s, though, there was a growing cohort of women whose privileged social background and liberal

⁸ In the context of Nazi Germany, Moritz Föllmer argues for “multiple” and “alternative” individualities and rejects both a teleological reading of individuality in the context of modernity as well as a strict dichotomy between the individual and the collective. Moritz Föllmer, “Was Nazism Collectivistic? Redefining the Individual in Berlin, 1930–1945,” *The Journal of Modern History* 82 (2010): 66–69.

⁹ Ilse Steinhoff's work was also published in the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, the *Illustrierter Beobachter*, and the *Zürcher Illustrierte*, to name some further examples, for example, see Ilse Steinhoff, “Die Weltstadt in der Steppe,” *Zürcher Illustrierte* 14, no. 49 (1938): 1502–03.

¹⁰ Margret Boveri, *Ein Auto, Wüsten, blaue Perlen. Bericht über eine Fahrt durch Vorderasien* (Zürich: Atlantis, 1939). On this particular trip, compare also Heike B. Görtemaker, *Ein deutsches Leben. Die Geschichte der Margret Boveri* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005), 99–112.

¹¹ DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1861, Liselotte Purper, “Diary Entries,” October 29 to December 5, 1940.

¹² On Steinhoff's photography and a postcolonial German imagination of Africa, compare Willeke Sandler, “Deutsche Heimat in Afrika: Colonial Revisionism and the Construction of Germanness through Photography,” *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 1 (2013), 37–61. Elizabeth Harvey included both Ilse Steinhoff and Liselotte Purper in her chapter, “Seeing the World: Photography, Photojournalism and Visual Pleasure in the Third Reich,” in *Pleasure and Power in Nazi Germany*, ed. Swett, Pamela, Corey Ross, and Fabrice d'Almeida (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 177–204. On Liselotte Purper's career, and especially the way in which Purper presented war as an opportunity for adventure, compare also Elizabeth Harvey, “Ich war überall. Die NS Propagandaphotographin Liselotte Purper,” in *Volksgenossinnen: Frauen in der NS-Volksgemeinschaft*, ed. Sybille Steinacher (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), 138–53. For a transnational and comparative reading of Margret Boveri's travel writing from the Middle East, compare Gonçalo Vilas-Boas, “Travellers to Persia in the Thirties: Maud von Rosen, Robert Byron and Margret Boveri,” *Cadernos de Literatura Comparada* 14–15, no. 1 (2006): 119–44.

¹³ A telling example of this can be found in Jo Burr Margadant's edited collection, which highlights the way select French women individually crafted selfhood and femininity to suit their own needs in a way that made them successfully stand out. Jo Burr Margadant, ed., *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

education—including in post-World War I Germany—stretched their horizons beyond those of their foremothers and beyond national borders as well.¹⁴ These women were no longer the exceptions to prove the rule, but rather served as evidence that norms were shifting and that their scope was widening, however slowly. This social development attracted considerable attention, and the myth of the emancipated woman materialized alongside her real-life counterpart.¹⁵ Consequently, historical research on women such as Steinhoff, Purper, and Boveri has often seen them primarily as the confirmation and illustration of these broader cultural shifts.¹⁶ Such scholarship is valuable precisely because it is able to articulate the intangible systems underlying social and cultural configurations by looking at lived practices of groups both large and small. However, an inevitable consequence of this historical perspective involves the oversimplification of the individual, who must be condensed before she can form part of a greater whole.¹⁷ Engaging more with how female adventurers inhabited and narrated their own lives, and the places they traveled to in the late 1930s and early 1940s, is a reminder not only of their subjectivity, but also reveals their spirited commitment to declaring and defending their individuality.¹⁸ In sum, these three women are interesting to the historian because they insisted on turning the new myth of female independence into a subjective lived reality, but even more so because they exemplify the wider trend toward a more individualist assertion of the self—regardless of gender.

Other emblematic aspects of modern life also intersected with the woman journalists' quest for adventure, most notably technology, gender, and nationhood. These three overarching categories were all prominent and anxiety-laden topics of contention in Weimar Germany, which were then, supposedly, resolved in accordance with National Socialist ideology after 1933. The widespread fascination attached to all three demonstrates their perceived function as symbolic gauges for the state of society at large.¹⁹ It is worth noting that these themes took on amplified significance for women journalists traveling abroad. They depended on modern technology to facilitate their mobility and their work; alone

¹⁴ This was true of journalism in the 1930s, where approximately one in ten registered German journalists was a woman. Overall, the number of female journalists increased under Nazi rule. Deborah Barton, "Rewriting the Reich: German Woman Journalists as Transnational Mediators for Germany's Rehabilitation," *Central European History* 51 (2018): 567–68. The modern woman, and especially her representation, also excited contemporary media interest. Her global reach is thematized in the following essay collection: Alys Eve Weinbaum et al., ed., *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). For a study that investigates how women experienced cultural continuity and change between Weimar and Nazi Germany, especially in terms of modernity, media, and their own participation in the public sphere, compare Kate Lacey, *Feminine Frequencies: Gender, German Radio, and the Public Sphere, 1923–1945* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996). On a widening range of permissible, even desirable, careers for women in Nazi public discourse, compare Föllmer, "Was Nazism Collectivistic?" 77–78.

¹⁵ This was especially evident in the media. On the "types" of modern women in Weimar Germany and the reiterative co-construction of the "New Woman" by press and readership alike, compare Jochen Hung, "The Modernized Gretchen: Transformations of the 'New Woman' in the Late Weimar Republic," *German History* 33, no. 1 (2015): 52–79.

¹⁶ As in the work on Steinhoff, Purper, and Boveri cited previously. Other relevant illustrations of this point include Kate Lacey's discussion of the radio broadcaster Carola Hersel in Lacey, *Feminine Frequencies*, 85–95, and Lora Wildenthal's contextualization of Clara Brockmann's colonial experiences in "'She Is the Victor': Bourgeois Women, Nationalist Identities, and the Ideal of the Independent Woman Farmer in German Southwest Africa," *Social Analysis* 33 (1993): 68–88.

¹⁷ For a discussion of subjectivity, gender, and the bias of their "external" construction, compare Michael Roper, "Slipping Out of View: Subjectivity and Emotion in Gender History," *History Workshop Journal* 59, no. 1 (2005): 57–72.

¹⁸ Föllmer has traced a similar spirit in his study of how Germans living in Berlin demanded to be recognized as individuals from the Weimar years through Nazism and into the Cold War. He argues that this core demand remained constant across democratic and totalitarian regimes. Moritz Föllmer, *Individuality and Modernity in Berlin: Self and Society from Weimar to the Wall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁹ Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic. The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York: Hill and Yang, 1993), 95–100, 275–78; Bernhard Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890–1945* (Cambridge: University Press, 2005), 2–5.



Fig. 1. “Clear and energetic is the face of the young glider pilot from Swakopmund. She is not only a good mother to her two children—she is also a comrade to her husband in colonial work!” Source: Ilse Steinhoff, *Deutsche Heimat in Afrika. Ein Bildbuch aus unseren Kolonien*.

and far from home, they reckoned with their femininity and made womanhood a topic in their writing or photography; and, finally, being in foreign countries threw their sense of national identity and awareness of Germany’s global role into sharp relief. More still, in the context of these women’s travels and adventurous experiences, the borders among the three themes grew indistinct as they bled into one another, each reinforcing and informing the others.

For example, in her volume of African travel photography, the photojournalist Ilse Steinhoff included a portrait of a young German pilot sitting in her glider aircraft (see [Figure 1](#)). The woman’s face, shot from above, is narrow and set in concentration. Her features are regular and exhibit high cheekbones, her skin is fair and free of blemishes, and her nose is straight and slender.²⁰ The presentation of these details contributes to an aesthetic that first, echoes an ideological commitment to physiognomy as the objective expression of her authentic German identity via her race and, second, exemplifies a visual echo of Weimar artistic modernity remolded into an overtly Nazi format.²¹ The accompanying caption identifies the woman as an energetic aviatrix, as a virtuous mother of two, as a supportive wife, and as a German engaged in ongoing colonial efforts. The picture, in combination with the brief descriptive characterization of its subject, fuses in the figure of the woman technological expertise, nurturing femininity, and loyalty to the nation. Of course, the very existence of the photograph itself depended upon an analogous crossover in its creator. Ilse Steinhoff, camera in hand, understood her own role to be that of audacious adventurer journeying to Africa deploying the tools of modern camera technology in the service of her homeland.

Heroic Narratives of Technology and Celebrity

Technology was an integral component of modern travel and as such was also the subject of popular journalism, photography, and writing. It even gave rise to the figure of the female technophile, something Katharina Kellermann has explored in her research on the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany. In particular, Kellermann underscores the dual role of technology as a material prerequisite for travel itself and as a literary or artistic device to embellish the image of the plucky modern heroine, though her work, too, is directed more toward the

²⁰ Ilse Steinhoff, *Deutsche Heimat in Afrika. Ein Bildbuch aus unseren Kolonien*, 2nd ed., ed. Reichskolonialbund (Berlin: Wilhelm Limpert-Verlag, 1941), unpaginated.

²¹ On the modern aesthetic of Nazi portrait photography as informed by a Weimar avant-garde, and on the cultural continuity of physiognomic theory in relation to nationhood, compare Leesa Rittelmann, “Facing Off: Photography, Physiognomy, and National Identity in the Modern German Photobook,” *Radical History Review* 106 (2010): 137–61.

cultural framework within which these women traveled than toward the women themselves.²² Stories of how women mastered technology were very well received, even raising their protagonists to celebrity status. Although the world of aviation was dominated by men, women such as Elly Beinhorn or Hanna Reitsch enjoyed a great deal of public recognition for their aerial exploits. Beinhorn was famous for setting several records, including flying over three continents in one day; Reitsch was celebrated for her numerous gliding feats and enjoyed a reputation for her work as a test pilot.²³

Meanwhile, female race car drivers such as Elisabeth Junek and Margot von Einsiedel were rivals on the road and enjoyed success and acclaim in Weimar Germany.²⁴ Other celebrity drivers included Erika Mann, the eldest daughter of the German literary figure Thomas Mann. Erika became one of the most recognizable figures to personify an androgynous version of the so-called *Neue Frau*. In 1931, she signed up to participate in a 10,000-kilometer rally across Europe.²⁵ Like the marvelous modern machines that made adventures in the air and on the road possible, though not yet universally accessible, celebrity was a nascent product of modernity. In the new world of illustrated weeklies, faces could become instantly recognizable. Moreover, such publications were popular outlets for Purper's and Steinhoff's photos. Travel, technology, and celebrity culture were readily combined in narratives of female heroism.

Liselotte Purper, habitually on the verge of overconfidence, would surely have embraced fame on a grand, flashy scale had it come her way. Though professionally successful—no doubt because of rather than despite her self-assured demeanor—Purper never reached the kind of celebrity status that either Erika Mann or the aviatrix Hanna Reitsch enjoyed. Instead, she looked to Reitsch with great admiration, hoping one day to photograph this iconic adventurer.²⁶ Importantly, this did not stop Purper from undertaking adventures of her own. On the contrary, at times she inwardly framed and narrated her adventurous experiences as though she were starring on a cinema screen—as well as directing the imagined film itself.²⁷ Here it is worth very briefly alluding to a coincidental, mirrored inversion in the career of Leni Riefenstahl, one of Nazi Germany's most infamous filmmakers. After World War II had long ended, Riefenstahl traveled to Kenya and Sudan, among other African countries, where she worked as a photographer and enjoyed a degree of renewed professional success with her published African photography books.²⁸ Attempting to distance herself from associations with her Nazi past, it is no small irony that Riefenstahl unintentionally reinvented herself in a way that echoed photojournalistic predecessors such as Ilse Steinhoff, and perhaps even Liselotte Purper.

Meanwhile, Margret Boveri was unlikely to be seduced by fame and fortune in the first place. More than a decade older than Liselotte Purper, she was pragmatic, assiduous, and

²² See, for example, her discussion of race car driver Clärenore Stinnes. Katharina Kellermann, *Herrinnen der Technik zwischen 1918 und 1945. Selbstinszenierung—Funktionalisierung—Einschreibung ins deutsche kulturelle Gedächtnis* (Bamberg, Germany: University of Bamberg Press, 2017), 12–14, 75–77, 86–89.

²³ Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity*, 116–57; Bernhard Rieger, “Hanna Reitsch (1912–1979): The Global Career of a Nazi Celebrity,” *German History* 26, no. 3 (2008), 387. On Elly Beinhorn as a model “individual” modern woman, compare Föllmer, *Individuality and Modernity in Berlin*, 58.

²⁴ Anke Hertling, “Angriff auf eine Männerdomäne,” *Autosportlerinnen in den zwanziger und dreißiger Jahren*, *Feministische Studien* 30, no. 1 (2012): 12–13.

²⁵ Irmela von der Lühe, *Erika Mann, Eine Biographie* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2001), 77–79; Hertling, “Angriff auf eine Männerdomäne,” 12.

²⁶ DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1849, Liselotte Purper, “Letter to Kurt Orgel,” March 22, 1943.

²⁷ For example, while traveling to the ethnic German village of Cogeaalac in northern Dobruja, Purper described a group of travelers in highly romanticized, cinematic terms, concluding that “any film director would give much for such a well-costumed type. We [had] to get out and take photographs.” DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1861, Liselotte Purper, “Diary Entry,” November 11, 1940.

²⁸ On Leni Riefenstahl's postwar photography in Africa, compare Alexandra Ludewig, “Leni Riefenstahl's Encounter with the Nuba. In Search of the Sublime,” *Interventions* 8, no. 1 (2006): 83–101, and George Paul Meiu, “Riefenstahl on Safari. Embodied Contemplation in East Africa,” *Anthropology Today* 24, no. 2 (2008): 18–22.



Fig. 2. “Bungo” journeying across the Black Sea between baskets and chickens. Source: Margret Boveri, *Ein Auto, Wüsten, blaue Perlen. Bericht über eine Fahrt durch Vorderasien*.

persistent. Her 1938 trip to the Middle East had a very clear purpose, which was to win her a position as a full-fledged foreign correspondent for the well-respected *Frankfurter Zeitung*. In March 1938, she and her close friend Doris Heider were driving across Anatolia toward Syria in “Bungo,” Boveri’s trusty Buick. Boveri’s relationship to her car was deeply significant, and the vehicle was indispensable to her because it provided symbolic and literal freedom of mobility. Although Boveri was not chasing fame per se, she still imitated the dashing technophiles of the era, and the automobile stood front and center in her own adventure story as well. “Bungo” very quickly became a main (and titular) character in her journey’s recitation (see [Figure 2](#)).²⁹

The road trip got off to a promising start, which saw Boveri and Heider driving during the day and camping out in a tent at night. But they soon found themselves struggling. On the first day, crossing a shallow river still counted as an exciting photo opportunity, yet by the fifth day, fording waterways without a bridge had already become an annoying occurrence. They relied heavily on the help of locals as roads turned out to be rough or non-existent, maps were inaccurate, and their car kept breaking down. The suitcase rack on the car’s exterior crashed, almost causing them to lose their luggage. More often than not, Boveri fixed the car herself.³⁰

²⁹ Margret Boveri, *Ein Auto, Wüsten, blaue Perlen. Bericht über eine Fahrt durch Vorderasien*, 22–36.

³⁰ Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (SBB), Berlin, Nachlass Boveri, 9.1, Margret Boveri, “Rundbrief Ankara,” March 24 and 30, 1938.

In South West Africa in 1937, meanwhile, Ilse Steinhoff found herself in similar predicaments. She learned to drive carefully after her car sunk into deep sand on the side of the road, and she had to spend two hours under the scorching sun digging it out again with the help of some locals.³¹ But the ordeal was not for naught. The scenario provided Steinhoff with an opportunity to demonstrate the stark authenticity of her trip, which came with unexpected, landscape-specific hurdles, and it also allowed her to prove herself capable and undaunted in the face of dust and heat. Of course, Steinhoff had no choice but to dig out the vehicle—without it she would have been stranded. Here it is worth reiterating that, despite the incumbent difficulties, both Steinhoff and Boveri actively recognized the freedom of mobility cars afforded them. Moreover, they made sure to emphasize the fact that they themselves were the ones to fix their motors when they broke down or to dig them out of the mud and sand when the wheels got stuck. These incidents offer a glimpse into the complex phenomenon by which people came to deeply rely on and simultaneously attain self-sufficiency through the proliferation of modern technologies.

Although the importance of the automobile as a tool for mobility, both literal and figurative, cannot be overstated, the camera also transcended its definition as a material object and took on almost mythical contours, acting as both shield and weapon for the individual woman traversing potentially dangerous territory on her own. They were more than merely travelers; they were documenters. The camera bore the promise of permanent visual experience freed from geographic or temporal constraints and further represented the transformative potential of modern technology.³² Liselotte Purper not only exhibited practical professional expertise in how she handled her camera, but she also saw her own identity inextricably tied to the object. Her work as a photojournalist enabled her to embark on adventure and to see so much of the world, as was the case for Ilse Steinhoff, too. Purper's photographs were published in political propaganda papers like the *NS-Frauenwarte* and *Frauenkultur*, but also in illustrated periodicals and magazines such as the *Münchener Illustrierte Presse* and *Die neue Linie*.³³ Her camera served to expand her world, and her photographs contributed to a visual culture designed to expand the world of Germans at home. Purper was exacting and precise in her work, and she prepared her shots carefully. Some of her photography was entirely staged. This aligned well with the way her work was published, namely, with the purpose of disseminating a positive image of Nazi Germany's expansionist war.³⁴

In November 1940, Liselotte Purper joined a group of Dobruja Germans as they were transported by ship up the Danube from Cernavoda in Romania to a temporary camp in Semlin, a part of Belgrade. She thus involved herself with a large-scale Nazi colonial resettlement program that sought to bring ethnic German minorities "*Heim ins Reich*" ("home to the Reich") from Soviet into eastern German territory. They were to be given homes in the newly annexed Poland, and Purper had been commissioned to accompany and record these resettlement journeys on film. The resettlement program was constructively supported and

³¹ Steinhoff, *Deutsche Heimat in Afrika*.

³² Ute Eskildsen, "A Chance to Participate: A Transitional Time for Women Photographers," in *Visions of the "Neue Frau": Women and the Visual Arts in Weimar Germany*, ed. Marsha Meskimmon and Shearer West (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), 62–63. On the ways in which the camera facilitated the exploration of a transformative self, compare Elizabeth Otto, *Haunted Bauhaus: Occult Spirituality, Gender Fluidity, Queer Identities, and Radical Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 104–26.

³³ Note that the *NS-Frauenwarte* was a party-approved women's magazine put out by the *NS-Frauenschaft*, the women's wing of the NSDAP, and that *Frauenkultur* was the women's magazine affiliated with the *Deutsches Frauenwerk*. On Purper's publications, compare Harvey, "Seeing the World," 178–79.

³⁴ Shelley Baranowski has looked at how tourism and consumer culture were integrated into Nazi ideology and popular practice through the institution *Kraft durch Freude* (KdF) (Strength through Joy) where she illustrates how KdF tourism overlapped with racialized German attitudes and connected German military expansion to popular consumption under Nazism. Shelley Baranowski, *Strength Through Joy: Consumerism and Mass Tourism in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).



Fig. 3. This is a private photograph of Liselotte Purper that was taken close to Bucharest in 1942. Source: Reproduced courtesy of Deutsches Historisches Museum, estate of Liselotte Orgel-Köhne, uncatalogued.

enabled by German women who traveled east and offered domestic, logistical, and journalistic assistance. In order to make this mass migration possible, the program also involved the forcible removal of hundreds of thousands of Polish citizens, whose homes, farms, and workshops were taken over without compensation.³⁵ In her role as photographer, Purper was pre-occupied by creating the perfect shot for her camera. On November 4th, at the start of the trip, she was in Belgrade taking photographs of a temporary camp for ethnic Germans. Her diary entry, penned after a long day of work, shows both her dedication to her craft and her impatience with her subjects. “I cannot direct the whole horde and take care of the camera and picture all at once. The people are like children who are often photographed by their parents and cannot escape artificial rigidity,” she wrote, before describing how she took pictures in the tents and barracks, both with and without flash.³⁶

By insisting on directing a scene before recording it, Liselotte Purper exerted aesthetic command over what she portrayed. Being a photographer allowed her both to see the world and to have her view of it be seen by others. It is fair to say that the camera was deeply ingrained in her sense of self; most photographs or descriptions of her feature her beloved Rolleiflex (see [Figure 3](#)).³⁷ In many ways, the camera thus acted as an inward lens, too, because it allowed her to define herself as a photographer first and foremost. Moreover, it asserted her individual control over a given situation because she composed scenes that she first created, and then photographed. That sense of control over oneself

³⁵ Elizabeth Harvey, *Women and the Nazi East: Agents and Witnesses of Germanization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 119–45.

³⁶ DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1861, Liselotte Purper, “Diary Entries,” November 4, 1940.

³⁷ Such as in a collection of private photographs taken between 1938–1944. DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung und Bildarchiv, uncatalogued, “Er + Sie von 1938 bis 1944.”

and one's surroundings was essential for women who were traveling alone or, as in the case of both Margret Boveri and Liselotte Purper, in the company of a female friend.³⁸ Women traveling independently were still unusual enough to attract attention, even though absolute numbers were higher in comparison to previous decades. How women adventuring abroad saw themselves is important here because these self-conceptualizations harbored within them wider cultural patterns of identity that mingled with their individual personalities.

Living the Modern Adventure: Femininity and National Identity

In the introduction to *Deutsche Heimat in Afrika*, Ilse Steinhoff rejected the bravery Germans in the metropole ascribed to her for having visited the African continent all alone, instead insisting that there was no need to be courageous in “civilized Africa,” where an ongoing German influence ensured the place was “no more dangerous or precarious than anywhere in Europe!”³⁹ This opening statement echoes longstanding ideas about what kind of colonial spaces and behaviors were appropriate for German women and also sees Steinhoff characterize herself as a relatable figure who was conscientious in her choices and humble about her achievements.⁴⁰ It furthermore reproduces a deep-rooted dynamic by which civilized Europe is identified in opposition to a “savage” Other, a perspective that was used to justify European colonial exploits, in this particular instance Germany’s ongoing presence in its former colonies. Ilse Steinhoff anticipated the surprise of her reader at seeing a woman traveling alone and drew on existing cultural narratives to explain her journey, even going so far as to claim her readers would be still more surprised once she revealed how German these parts of Africa really were.

There are two portraits of Ilse Steinhoff in her book, and neither suggests she was especially demure or that she undervalued her own courage. One depicts her smiling on a walking safari with a rifle slung over her shoulder while on the lookout for lions. The other is superimposed on a map of South West Africa (see [Figure 4](#)).⁴¹ In it, Steinhoff stands next to a man identified as a “Bushman from the area around Fort Namutoni,” which is located on the edge of the Etosha Pan. The man is showing Steinhoff a bow and arrow, and he is presented as an exoticized African warrior, unblemished by civilization. Steinhoff, in turn, is clearly portrayed in the counterpart role of European explorer. Her shoes are dusty, her clothing suited to the heat, and her bobbed hair frames her tanned face. She is also presented in a way that underscores her femininity and draws attention to her physicality. A belt cinches at her waist, her short outfit leaves her arms and legs bare, her shirt is open-collared, and her pose has one knee bent slightly in front of the other. Her dynamic body language communicates interest in what the man is showing her, but is also authoritative and, in facing toward the camera, she is aware of the moment as a performative one. The man is young and handsome. In photographs printed a few pages earlier, he is wearing a loose button-down shirt, but next to Steinhoff he is clad only in a loincloth, with beads in his hair.⁴² Although the photograph is not sexualized, its intimacy involves an implicit defiance of the European anxieties that vilified any closeness between white women and Black men. The two are almost touching, though it is worth noting that the unnamed man is a static supplement to Steinhoff’s animation. She is holding the arrow and gesticulating, while he stands still, transformed by the camera from a person to a prop. There is no question about the balance of power between the two of them. Ilse Steinhoff may be

³⁸ Liselotte Purper was traveling with her close friend, the filmmaker Margot Monnier, a frequent companion on her trips abroad.

³⁹ Steinhoff, *Deutsche Heimat in Afrika*.

⁴⁰ Lora Wildenthal, “Race, Gender, and Citizenship in the German Colonial Empire,” in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 278–81.

⁴¹ Ilse Steinhoff, *Deutsche Heimat in Afrika*.

⁴² Sandler, “Deutsche Heimat in Afrika,” 43.



Fig. 4. Ilse Steinhoff “on the road” in South West Africa. *Auf pad* is a term local to the area that in this context likely referred to a long journey of discovery. It is worth noting that this photograph was noticeably edited from the original. Source: Ilse Steinhoff, *Deutsche Heimat in Afrika. Ein Bildbuch aus unseren Kolonien*.

the one receiving instruction, but she was unquestionably in control: of herself, of the situation, and of its visual representation.

Of course, drawing attention to this one photograph does not mean Ilse Steinhoff would always have been able to merge her femininity so seamlessly with her assertiveness, nor does it suggest that because she was able to do so on this occasion, women did not still encounter significant barriers as a result of their gender. Margret Boveri began her journalistic career at the *Berliner Tageblatt* under the patronage of its editor, Paul Scheffer. Her dream was to eventually attain a permanent position with the *Frankfurter Zeitung* as a political foreign correspondent. This had been denied her on the grounds that no woman had ever held a seat at the newspaper’s main editorial meeting, something the job would have granted.⁴³ When, in October 1937, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* promised her that the chance of a position had grown on the condition that she undertake a lengthy international trip to

⁴³ On Boveri’s career trajectory, 1934–1945, compare Görtemaker, *Ein deutsches Leben*, 63–210.

prove her mettle, Boveri agreed to the plan immediately. The fact that she was required to show herself worthy above and beyond what would have been asked of a man was thus the main catalyst for her road adventure to the Middle East in the spring of 1938.⁴⁴ After struggling through the convoluted Anatolian landscape, with its lack of trustworthy roads and maps unfit for the territory, Margret Boveri and her travel companion Doris Heider drove on to Aleppo and then Beirut, where Heider became too ill to continue. She had been fighting cancer for some time and at this point had to return home for treatment. So Boveri hired a Turkish driver to assist her and drove on through the desert from Damascus to Baghdad, where she arrived on May 10th, alone.⁴⁵ There, she learned that men and women alike considered it unsafe to travel solo in the region, but that only women had until recently been subject to separate official travel regulations.⁴⁶

Boveri's trials were not in vain. Initially, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* persisted in denying her a permanent position at the newspaper. She continued writing and submitting journalistic reports related to her experiences in the Middle East after her return, for example a political analysis of problems facing the region in a special edition of *Volk und Reich*, a monthly propaganda publication, or an extended report of her journey in the travel magazine *Atlantis*. She also wrote two books about the trip, one a political study of the Middle East and the other the travel book mentioned earlier, starring her car "Bungo" as a protagonist.⁴⁷ At the end of February 1939, a year after first heading to Istanbul, Boveri finally received an offer to work as a foreign correspondent for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. It took her almost two years of concentrated ambition and work to get there. Looking back at the lengthy process, she attributed her success to her 1938 road trip, and more broadly, to her willingness for fearless travel.

In general, it can be said that the first women to join the staff of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* before the outbreak of World War II earned this honor by means of unusually heavy physical exertion. Lily Abegg through her adventurous trips on military trucks across the inhospitable mountains of Inner China, and me, doing repair work with a wrench and hammer under my car on the clay roads of Anatolia. It did us no harm.⁴⁸

Like her Swiss colleague Lily Abegg, a correspondent based in Japan, Margret Boveri was able to advance her career because she was willing to incorporate adventure into her professional life. Female adventurers did not just encounter new and unfamiliar places in the scope of their travels, but also explored and occupied traditionally masculine spaces.

Whether a woman chose to accentuate her femininity on her travels depended on context and situation, but also on personality and self-stylization. Generally, Boveri displayed little patience for the topics women were expected to be interested in, such as fashion or domesticity, and she categorically refused to write for the women's pages of newspapers or to participate in publications that brought together exclusively female writers.⁴⁹ In the 1930s and 1940s, she worked hard to temper her femininity in order to better integrate into the very masculine atmosphere of the editorial office. Although this suited her personality, it was also a conscious choice, and a malleable one. While living in Munich and Berlin in the

⁴⁴ Görtemaker, *Ein deutsches Leben*, 95–100.

⁴⁵ SBB, Nachlass Boveri, 9.1, Margret Boveri, "Rundbrief Beirut," May 5, 1938; "Rundbrief Damaskus, Rest Haven," May 7, 1938; "Rundbrief Maude Hotel, Bagdad", May 11, 1938.

⁴⁶ Boveri *Ein Auto, Wüsten, blaue Perlen. Bericht über eine Fahrt durch Vorderasien*, 148–50.

⁴⁷ SBB, Nachlass Boveri, 3.2; Margret Boveri, "Die Probleme Vorderasiens," *Volk und Reich* 7 (1939): 521–27; "Von blauen Perlen, Aberglauben und vielen Wassern," *Atlantis* 10, no. 9 (1938): 509–24. Margret Boveri, *Vom Minarett zum Bohrturm. Eine politische Biographie Vorderasiens* (Zürich: Atlantis, 1938); Boveri, *Ein Auto, Wüsten, blaue Perlen. Bericht über eine Fahrt durch Vorderasien*.

⁴⁸ Margret Boveri, *Verzweigungen. Eine Autobiographie*, ed. Uwe Johnson (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1982), 321.

⁴⁹ Görtemaker, *Ein deutsches Leben*, 111.

mid-1920s, Boveri had done the opposite. She tried to visually conform to the heteronormative standard after she was approached by women who mistook her sexual orientation. "From this I drew the consequence to present myself as feminine as possible in my hairstyle and clothing," she reflected, decades later.⁵⁰

By contrast, Liselotte Purper felt much more comfortable incorporating conventional femininity into her identity, including when she engaged in harmless flirtation with dashing young men. Madly in love with her partner Kurt Orgel, she was even more committed to her independence, so much so that when Orgel proposed she hesitated despite her unwavering affection. She left his proposal unanswered for several weeks before cautiously agreeing to the engagement in February 1943.⁵¹ When she traveled, she instrumentalized her femininity if she thought it might help her get ahead. This was as true when she was working as it was when she was looking to enjoy herself. While she was waiting for the official start of her Danube resettlement trip in early November 1940, Purper reconnected with Hans Reiter in Belgrade. Reiter was an old acquaintance whose parents had known her parents, and one evening he gave her a riotous tour of the city's nightlife, returning her safely to her hotel at two o'clock in the morning.⁵² Three days later, Purper finally crossed the border into Romania, where her camera was promptly confiscated. She realized she did not have any money with which to pay the expected bribe. Unruffled, she deployed her "womanly weapons," which, as she later stated, "are the best weapons. My success proved me right: gallantly, with an agreeable smile, my camera was handed back to me!"⁵³ In such scenarios, the men she encountered, Germans and locals alike, always remained supporting characters who facilitated her adventure and then receded into the background. Nevertheless, like Margret Boveri and Ilse Steinhoff, Purper was acutely aware of how she presented herself. All three women made active choices in order to navigate their femininity and its implications, but the nature and nuance of those choices varied.

Equally important as their own personal experiences navigating womanhood abroad was the way in which the writers and photojournalists depicted women. Though not true of every individual case, the lives of other women did garner the attention of female adventurers abroad and figured as a recurring theme in their work. This was true especially of other German women abroad and stands out in settings colored by settler and colonial narratives. Ilse Steinhoff's photography, for example, included various visual interpretations of the modern German woman in such a setting. Steinhoff emphasized how the colonial *Hausfrau* combined domestic femininity with courageous pragmatism. They largely conformed to the "Imagined *Hausfrau*" as described by Nancy Reagin, though with some adjustments.⁵⁴ A photograph introducing the reader to Frau Böhme, for example, shows her directing her Black servant Johannes in setting the table for the traditional German coffee and cake, which was to be served outdoors. Frau Böhme was hosting her afternoon gathering on lion hunting grounds, and, Steinhoff noted, kept a rifle close by just in case.⁵⁵

Other examples show German women cuddling cheetahs or managing their sprawling family farms. Steinhoff photographed African women, too, showing them at work, with

⁵⁰ Deutsches Literaturarchiv (DLA), Marbach am Neckar, A: Mohler, Briefe 1999.01, Margret Boveri, "Letter to Armin Mohler, Höfen," October 7, 1954.

⁵¹ DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1849, Liselotte Purper, "Letter to Kurt Orgel, Berlin," February 22, 1943.

⁵² DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1861, Liselotte Purper, "Diary Entry," November 6, 1940.

⁵³ This quotation is from a typed version of her diary, which Purper revised and edited. DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1862, Liselotte Purper, "Diary Entry," 9 November 1940. In the original, she wrote: "So I had to resort to my 'womanly weapons' ... I seized on them successfully and reclaimed my camera." DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1861, Liselotte Purper, "Diary Entry," November 9, 1940.

⁵⁴ Nancy Reagin, "The Imagined *Hausfrau*: National Identity, Domesticity, and Colonialism in Imperial Germany," *Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 1 (2001): 67, 80–81.

⁵⁵ Steinhoff, *Deutsche Heimat in Afrika*.

their children, in traditional or Western clothing, and even in comparative scenes echoing the poses of white German women. But whereas African women are generally portrayed as either exotic curiosities embedded within a foreign land or in roles of subservience to Europeans, the German women are presented in a manner that celebrates their expression of national identity and links it to feminine liberation. Although Steinhoff was the one ostensibly caught in the midst of adventure, it is worth noting that the image of the colonial woman, who, as so-called *Kulturträgerin*, was tasked with maintaining German culture abroad, also took on distinctly adventurous characteristics.

Being abroad was an opportunity not only to highlight German femininity against a foreign backdrop, but to imagine Germany and one's own national identity anew. Individuals who traveled abroad and published their reports in a press under the control of Nazism were all the more inclined to cast German identity in a rigid manner. In her book, Ilse Steinhoff included a series of photographs taken in Windhoek's city center that reproduce a clichéd version of Germany, including a shop selling clocks, bakeries advertising apple cake with whipped cream, and a European hairdressing salon.⁵⁶ She goes out of her way to reiterate Windhoek's continued German identity, long after the official end of its colonial rule.

In her photographs, Ilse Steinhoff, like many others, also tapped into conversations surrounding the juxtaposition of civilization and wilderness, a dichotomy that had pervaded European colonial discourse for generations. In fact, this oppositional duality served female adventure-seekers well because it secured their self-understanding as civilized individuals and still allowed them to cast themselves as venturing forth into the midst of wilderness. After 1919, women were able to continue in their capacity as unofficial agents of German colonialism even though its male-dominated institutional backbone had been dismantled. In the context of being abroad in a colonial fantasyland, they claimed new freedoms for themselves while also engaging in the work of civilizing "backward" societies and claiming them for Germany's own.⁵⁷ Steinhoff rarely offered direct political commentary in her work, which is largely an exercise of colonial imagination rooted in nostalgia. Sometimes her work alluded to contemporary European imperialism in Africa, such as when her photographs featured in an article on Nairobi that meditated on the loss of German colonies and the hypothetical return of Tanganyika into German hands.⁵⁸ For the most part, though, Steinhoff's photographs of a German Africa were removed from political reality.

That Steinhoff's photography collection carries the title *Deutsche Heimat in Afrika* (*German Home in Africa*) is telling. Its possessiveness is impossible to overlook. This impression only deepens through the photographs, with Steinhoff's lens taking ownership of the sites of her African adventure. Building on her ascribed role as culture-bearer, she acted as a bridge between the "civilized" metropole and the "exotic" colony. In her further insistence of Germany's ongoing cultural impact despite no longer being an official colonial power, a conviction that depended upon Germany being defined by an innate and unshakeable cultural identity rather than by petty politics, she implicitly reinforced a longstanding narrative of German superiority that pitted German *Kultur* in opposition to a "mechanical" Western *Zivilisation*.⁵⁹

Although ostensibly following a reverse trajectory, namely bringing ethnic Germans from abroad into the sphere of the German Reich, Liselotte Purper's 1940 trip accompanying Dobruja Germans traveling from Cernavoda via Belgrade to the Wartheland echoed an overt colonial discourse. On the journey, she was more than happy to reap the benefits of belonging to a powerful German nation, one that she strongly identified with. This was not her first nor her last trip to eastern Europe during World War II and, in both her

⁵⁶ Steinhoff, *Deutsche Heimat in Afrika*.

⁵⁷ Lora Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884–1945* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 9, 172–77, 201–02.

⁵⁸ Steinhoff, "Die Weltstadt in der Steppe," 1502–03.

⁵⁹ Jürgen Kocka, "Bürgertum und Bürgerlichkeit als Probleme der deutschen Geschichte vom späten 18. Bis zum frühen 20. Jahrhundert," in *Bürger und Bürgerlichkeit im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Jürgen Kocka (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 42–49.

personal writings and her published photographic work, she frequently adopted a colonial perspective in her attitude toward her foreign surroundings. The language and visual culture attached to Purper's work, as well as to the work of other photojournalists in eastern Europe, borrowed from a similar colonizing gaze to the one being employed in the former German overseas colonies.⁶⁰ Her involvement in the resettlement program brought an additional layer of complexity with it, namely the patronizing and prejudiced attitude with which Reich Germans often encountered the ethnic Germans who were being resettled. The ethnic Germans had been deemed racially German by Nazi ideology and its institutions but, in practical terms, they were not considered to be equals. This was true of Purper's perspective as well. She admired the authenticity of the ethnic Germans' national identity but, unlike Steinhoff's celebration of German modernity in Africa, she pitied their poverty and primitive way of life.⁶¹

While on her assignment to document the resettlement journey, Purper was primed for adventure: "But what isn't dangerous here!... Something can happen to you anywhere—no doubt—but for nothing to happen to you here is what one would least expect."⁶² Her work was used for political purposes and cannot be separated from a National Socialist ideology, but she would have been unlikely to self-identify as a strongly politicized person. Nevertheless, she was content to support a status quo that benefited her personally.⁶³ Purper was far more interested in chasing adrenaline in a "wild east" than she was in analyzing political or military realities. When she did think in such terms, it was often to marvel at the richness the world seemed to offer Germans like herself while also providing an incomparable home to return to.⁶⁴ Purper never joined the Nazi Party, a fact she emphasized after 1945, when she instead characterized herself as a self-made woman who had succeeded against the odds, and further insisted her work as a photojournalist had always been apolitical. In reality, her loyalty to the Nazi regime never wavered despite not being a member of the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, also known as the Nazi Party), and Purper remained susceptible to the very propaganda she helped create for the duration of the Second World War.⁶⁵

In the Balkans in the autumn of 1940, Purper's propaganda photographs built on a familiar dichotomy that set modernity in relation to primitivity. Many of her images showcase the interaction between Reich German helpers and ethnic German settlers, which provide a telling example of the Nazi promise to bring modernity to their growing sphere of influence. They celebrate a bucolic rural existence while simultaneously exhibiting the possibilities of modern technology.⁶⁶ Evidence of the supposed hierarchy between grateful settlers and charitable representatives of the modern Nazi nation can also be seen at various points

⁶⁰ Harvey, *Women and the Nazi East*, 143–44.

⁶¹ DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1861, Liselotte Purper, "Diary Entries," November 11 and 13, 1940.

⁶² DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1861, Liselotte Purper, "Diary Entry," November 12, 1940.

⁶³ Through her work and travel, Purper as an individual lived out what Baranowski has more broadly described as the "fusion of pleasure and violence." Baranowski, *Strength through Joy*, 10.

⁶⁴ On a tour of Romania in 1942, she reflected, "Oh yes, Germany ... is glorious! If only every German could once sit outside the Reich in a small village, or even in a cosmopolitan city, how much would he experience what Germany is and how gifted those are who call it home." DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1861, Liselotte Purper, "Diary Entry," June 29, 1942.

⁶⁵ In early November 1944, approximately two weeks after Aachen was the first major German city to fall to the Allies, Purper uncritically echoed Nazi war propaganda and harshly condemned German refugees whom she had overheard speaking in a defeatist manner in a letter to Kurt Orgel, DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1849, Wittenberge, November 3, 1944.

⁶⁶ For example, place DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Bildarchiv, 3104/12, Liselotte Purper, "Dorfschule in Cobadin," which shows a local village school welcoming the arrival of the Reich Germans, next to DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Bildarchiv, 3121/5, Liselotte Purper, "Kinderwäsche an Bord eines Umsiedlerschiffes," where a uniformed woman is demonstrating to settlers how to wash a baby in the proper way.

in Purper's diary, such as in her descriptions of a clean but impoverished village in rural Romania. A girl, sick with malaria and excitement, had just given birth prematurely to her first child. She was administered to by the Reich German doctors and nurses who had been sent as part of the resettlement program and who gave their patient the best of what modern medicine could offer.⁶⁷

The emotional aspect of personal national identity also plays a significant role. Like Purper and Steinhoff, Margret Boveri was fascinated by the relationship between modern civilization and cultural specificity, though she considered meddling European influences in the Middle East to be dangerous. In the articles she sent back to Frankfurt about her journey, she treated topics ranging from water supply in Ankara to religious conflict in Iraq, from the French presence in Syria to oil extraction in Bahrain.⁶⁸ Her recurring conviction that Western technologies and European political interference were ruining the innate national identities of the region also aligned with Nazi ideology, though more tangentially.⁶⁹

In contrast to Purper, Boveri acknowledged the political impact of her profession, though her self-reflective streak did not save her from hypocrisy. Boveri actively considered herself critical of Nazism, even while her sense of nationalism never faltered. To her, being a German journalist in a National Socialist media landscape was a role of distinct political and historical relevance. She felt it was her responsibility to produce work as a conscientious journalist and to represent a different, more dignified, brand of German national pride that opposed the extremes of Nazism from within legitimate institutionalized structures.⁷⁰ Her stubbornness in this regard unleashed lasting arguments with friends and family who observed Nazi Germany from abroad. They could not understand Boveri's decision to keep writing for newspapers in Nazi Germany, nor could they accept her justifications for doing so.⁷¹ After all, Boveri conformed to regime demands, forfeited the principles she professed to adhere to, and prioritized national allegiance over her moral and ethical qualms. She was moreover able to fulfill her individual ambitions and advance her career.

Boveri's relationship to her homeland, and to her frequent periods of living and traveling abroad, was complex. She tried to stay carefully rational and objective in her political opinions and discussions. But her commitment to the nation of her birth, even though she had an American mother and could very easily have emigrated after 1933, was at its root inextricable from her fervent love and admiration for her German father, who had died when she was fifteen.⁷² Like Steinhoff, Boveri had internalized the trope that German culture and identity were inherently meaningful in a way that the "mechanical," institutional systems governing neighboring nations like England or France never could be.⁷³ This impassioned conviction was one she had inherited from her father and his social milieu, and its romanticism diverged sharply from her mother's pragmatism.⁷⁴ Familial tensions notwithstanding, growing up bilingually between two cultures contributed to her suitability for venturing abroad.

⁶⁷ DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1861, Liselotte Purper, "Diary Entry," November 11, 1940.

⁶⁸ SBB, Nachlass Boveri, 2.3; Margret Boveri, "Im eigenen Schmutz sich waschen?," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, May 8, 1938; "Moslem gegen Moslem. Schiiten und Sunniten, Beduinen und Effendis im Irak," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, July 19, 1938; "Was will Frankreich in Syrien? Zwischen Mandat und Bündnis," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, July 7, 1938; and "Auf den Bahrein Inseln. Das Spiel um Oel und Macht im Persischen Gold," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, August 7, 1938.

⁶⁹ Compare, for example, SBB, Nachlass Boveri, 2.3; Margret Boveri, "Stadt der guten Laune. Wandlungen in Bagdad, der Hauptstadt des Iraks," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, July 14, 1938; and "Überlieferung und rascher Wandel. Aufzeichnungen von einer Reise durch Iran," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, August 17, 1938.

⁷⁰ Boveri, *Verzweigungen*, 214–16.

⁷¹ Compare, for example, an early disagreement via correspondence with Doris Heider from the year 1933. Heider was the same friend who accompanied Boveri on her Middle East trip in 1938. In her letter, Boveri expresses cautious support for Adolf Hitler and Nazism. SBB, Nachlass Boveri, 2220, "Letter to Doris Heider, Vienna," October 21, 1933.

⁷² Görtemaker, *Ein deutsches Leben*, 18–20.

⁷³ Kocka, "Bürgertum und Bürgerlichkeit," 28–30.

⁷⁴ Görtemaker, *Ein deutsches Leben*, 21–23.

Boveri's life was full of travel and adventure before, during, and after World War II. In her willingness to embark on extended trips, she demonstrated steely personal ambition as well as an unquestioning dedication to the German fatherland, to which she saw herself duty-bound in the absolute. Her sense of purpose remained driven, serious, and professional throughout. Yet the impact of her personal familial history and innermost emotional ties cannot be discounted either.

Encountering foreign spaces could involve an almost expressionist projection of selfhood onto the invigorating canvas of an unfamiliar abroad, encountered with anticipation and emotion by Germans like Margret Boveri, Ilse Steinhoff, and Liselotte Purper. To go on an adventure by definition involves an element of discovery, not least self-discovery. On a 1941 journey from Berlin to The Hague, where she had been commissioned by the *NS-Frauenschaft*, which was the women's wing of the NSDAP, to photograph German youth groups on a field trip, Liselotte Purper felt in tune with the rhythmic progress of the night train carrying her westward.

It is wonderful! ... As I feel the rhythm of the moving train, I come alive and full of impatient expectation for what is to come. Every hour I will see something new, and I am ready to devour everything worth seeing with hungry eyes. To observe life in its infinite variety, its parallels and repetitions, in the indescribable bright mixture of everything that lives, loves, and suffers—it is inexhaustible and beautiful—today as on the first day.⁷⁵

In this statement, Purper placed an apparently inexhaustible supply of adventure directly in relation to her own personal experience. There was, it seemed, always the promise of something new and interesting around whichever corner she turned. Purper's words are brimming with wide-eyed wonder, but they are also full of the unspoken assumption that the world was hers for the taking. Because her words are so directly tied to her own visceral experience, any thought of her adventurous longing having been a shared one stays distant. And yet, when Purper expressed her eagerness and anticipation on that train to the Netherlands, she was echoing phrases used by women whom she had never met. Inducting her reader into the wonders of her African journey, Ilse Steinhoff proclaimed that "whoever has seen our colonies with open eyes and hearts, whoever has once felt the vastness and the freedom of this endless space, has succumbed to this foreign and yet German earth!"⁷⁶ And, writing from a tent in a rural part of Turkey's Bursa province in March 1938, about to brush her teeth beneath the starry night sky, the journalist Margret Boveri mused about her first night out on the road after a few days acclimatizing in Istanbul. "For me this was the most beautiful day yet," she wrote to her friends and family in a collective letter. "I am beginning to come alive."⁷⁷

The repeated use of vibrant, experiential imagery to express and justify the desire to explore unfamiliar terrain indicates the connection between the distinctive body of a person and that person's perception of her own experience as unique—even though she may have had many of the same feelings and sensations as others before and after her. Placing explicit value on the act of going out to encounter the world in such sensual terms, of seeing it for oneself and devouring it, results in the concentration of the experiential on a literal level and further confines it to the individual body. On the Danube in November 1940, almost a year before her poetic outpouring on the night train, however, Liselotte Purper encountered the physicality of adventure in very different terms. Aboard the *Franz Schubert* and in the company of Dobruja Germans, she waged a losing battle against a miniscule enemy. Much to her chagrin, the ethnic German settlers had brought fleas and lice onto the boat. "Can

⁷⁵ DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1861, Liselotte Purper, "Diary Entry," July 25, 1941.

⁷⁶ Steinhoff, *Deutsche Heimat in Afrika*.

⁷⁷ SBB, Nachlass Boveri, 9.1; Margret Boveri, "Rundbrief. Im Zelt, zwischen Bursa und Jenischehir," March 24, 1938, 22.

fleabites drive you insane?” Purper lamented after her first night on the river. As she kept her distance from the Dobruja Germans, an undeniably snobbish undertone crept into her complaints. “The settlers have not yet been disinfected. They themselves don’t notice anything, but us poor cultured folk suffer terribly,” she wrote.⁷⁸ Of course, Purper traveled as a protected and privileged representative of the Nazi regime, and her objective levels of discomfort or danger stayed relatively low. Even in direct comparison, she was less helpless than her temporary companions, who were venturing forth into far greater uncertainty, and of whom seventy died on the journey.⁷⁹

That said, Liselotte Purper deeply identified with adventure and derived personal pride from overcoming physical adversity—including fleabites. When she was back in Belgrade after her Danube journey, she wrote a compliment she received from Hans Reiter in her diary.

He admires the fact that I find my way in life so well and that I am so well able to adapt. But that is not difficult at all if you are not a demanding person and can put your own wishes to one side. In my profession, you only need eyes and ears anyway. Anything physical like hunger, thirst, tiredness, exertion must be felt as little as possible. It can never be an obstacle to the work.⁸⁰

Purper was prepared to sacrifice her physical comfort in the name of adventure and for her job, as long as she could do so ostentatiously. This is indicative of why the concept of adventure is so useful in the first place. It involves an interpretive, performative framing on the part of the adventurer, without being any less real because of it. That framing originates with the narrating self-presenting heroine herself, even if she is informed and inspired by her broader cultural context.

When she finally returned to “civilized” Vienna in early December, one of the first things Purper and her friend Margot Monnier did was ceremoniously drown the last flea—and make a record of the grandiose moment in her diary.⁸¹ This denotes another important element of adventure, namely that as an experience it remained contained and had a clear conclusion, involving the return to a separate normality. The idea of closure applied to Margret Boveri as well, who, before returning to Germany from Istanbul at the end of her three-month-long trek across the Middle East, indulged in a few days’ beach holiday in Miramare di Rimini, where she recovered from the taxing strains of her journey.⁸² Whether or not someone’s experiences, and the vulnerabilities that were brought to the fore, could be termed *adventurous* was closely tied to the privilege of that person’s position and further depended on her having an uncomplicated sense of her own agency. The adventure remained finite and, for this reason, controlled.

Conclusion

The first attempt to evaluate the work of German female photojournalists, including Liselotte Purper and Ilse Steinhoff, came during the Second World War and was initiated by Dr. Willy Stiewe, who was the editor-in-chief of the *Neue Illustrierte Zeitung*. In a six-page spread, he celebrated the expertise a select group of women was able to cultivate, allowing them to experience the world through the viewfinders of their cameras and to share the

⁷⁸ DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1861, Liselotte Purper, “Diary Entry,” November 15, 1940.

⁷⁹ DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1861, Liselotte Purper, “Diary Entry,” December 1, 1940.

⁸⁰ DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1861, Liselotte Purper, “Diary Entry,” November 20, 1940.

⁸¹ DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung, Do2 96/1861, Liselotte Purper, “Diary Entry,” December 4, 1940.

⁸² Görtemaker, *Ein deutsches Leben*, 106.

resulting images with a wider German audience (see Figure 5). Although Stiewe went out of his way to note that women in general were not suited to this line of work, the article commented that the photojournalists he was profiling, whose pictures featured scenes from Africa to the Alps, were singular in their skill. This, he continued, was due to both increasingly accessible modern camera technologies as well as the women's own extraordinary talents, which were being fostered in Nazi Germany.⁸³ Stiewe somewhat undermined these points in the opening paragraph, when he noted both the large number of registered female journalists as well as the breadth of their interests.⁸⁴ In his insistence on their collective exceptionalism, he reproduced a gendered assumption about women as incapable of thriving in a male world, while simultaneously celebrating a new form of femininity that was achieving just that.

The article comments on how technology, gender, and the nation figured in the context of mass media and adventure. For Stiewe, the scope of that adventure ranged from war to travel and from theater to sports. Throughout, his interpretation of these women's career paths can be read as an indicator of a broader shift that had been gradually developing over the course of the twentieth century thus far. Prior to World War I, opportunities for women to go abroad had classically been tied to collective or institutionalized endeavors, such as organized colonial or missionary efforts.⁸⁵ Now, however, women were traveling abroad alone as independent professionals, and Stiewe praised them for it. In placing their photographs and career paths side by side, he also generated from individuals with varied experiences a group of women who made independence both tangible and practicable. His focus was directed toward the wider cultural production of these women's collective choices. But all three women discussed here thought of themselves individually, not collectively, as modern women embracing the femininity of the future. They fixed their own cars, carried rifles and cameras on safari, and sought out wilderness because they could. Their pursuit of adventure foregrounded individual fulfillment even while they all understood themselves to be working in the service of a greater cause and recognized that they were participating in history as it was unfolding.

Willy Stiewe concluded his article with a warning:

Photojournalism is hard work and only rarely successful. How few are able to meet the high demands, how few are able to keep up the pace, to overcome the challenges that stand in the way of all work in the illustrated press? The profession of photojournalist is neither romantic nor adventurous, it is hurried and demands the ruthless commitment of the individual.⁸⁶

Of course, Stiewe showed much of the very romanticism he cautioned against. In previous paragraphs, he had sung the praises of those extraordinary women who were successful in the field, admiring their perseverance and indefatigability, their womanly art of persuasion, their tenacious energy, and their journalistic curiosity. In his article, he mythologized the imagined modern woman. He reproduced the kind of celebratory celebrity that had been gaining traction in illustrated magazines since the early 1920s, even while he also performatively stripped away the glamour of success, insisting instead on a grittier reality. But that appearance of authentic grit served the existing formula for adventure—and celebrity—rather than undermining it because it allowed the adventurer to overcome obstacles and feel like the main character in her own life story. Framing themselves in that kind of

⁸³ DHM, Liselotte Orgel-Köhne Dokumentensammlung und Bildarchiv, Folder 4 (uncatalogued); Willy Stiewe, "Die Frau als Bildberichterstatterin," 56–57.

⁸⁴ Stiewe, "Die Frau als Bildberichterstatterin," 55.

⁸⁵ An early exception to this rule can be found in the colonial experiences of radical nationalist Frieda von Bülow. Lora Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884–1945*, 62–69.

⁸⁶ Stiewe, "Die Frau als Bildberichterstatterin," 60.



Fig. 5. An excerpt from Willy Stiewe's article, showcasing various examples of Liselotte Purper's photography. Source: Reproduced courtesy of Deutsches Historisches Museum, estate of Liselotte Orgel-Köhne, uncatalogued.

narrative spotlight, an inward practice that echoed the same celebrity culture Stiewe himself was perpetuating, though on a smaller scale, allowed Ilse Steinhoff, Margret Boveri, and Liselotte Purper to retroactively transform their hurdles into opportunities through which to reiterate their own adaptability and individual identity. After 1945, this practice also provided a narrative structure through which to reinterpret their participation in a Nazi media landscape as one of adventurous self-fulfillment. The political relevance of photojournalist work done by Ilse Steinhoff and Liselotte Purper faded even further into the background, while Margret Boveri insisted on her personal and political integrity as a hard-working journalist facing unfavorable odds.

The books, articles, and photographs these women published generally transmit a straightforward and linear narrative. The resolve of the individual adventurer served as one possible model of German womanhood, whether she was abroad as a surrogate colonialist, as a propaganda photojournalist, or as an aspiring foreign correspondent. Like any good adventure story, these tales have a beginning, middle, and end, which all neatly tie together. But that narrative could not be curated until it had been lived, and at the same time could not be lived in a celebratory, public manner until a culture had emerged within which to embed it. Probing the individual experiences of Boveri, Purper, and Steinhoff reveals the iterative process through which that precarious balance was established.

The three women each overcame challenges, some of which featured in the published version, such as Steinhoff digging her car out of the desert, and others that were recorded in private sources, such as the fleabites Purper endured on the Danube. They also navigated larger issues beyond the scope of straightforward adventure. After years of enjoying the freedom to travel, Liselotte Purper became engaged to Kurt Orgel despite her fear of conventionality. That inner fear did not disappear. Margret Boveri on the other hand never married but was lastingly influenced by early family dynamics, which determined her emotional commitment to the idea of the German nation. This in turn fed into her dedication for her work as a journalist. Concentrating on their career-oriented adventures highlights what these women chose to prioritize among the wider complexity of their lives. It also highlights how flexible both their explicit political convictions and lived political experiences were. Steinhoff traveled to a colonial fantasyland and took photographs that reproduced a reductive narrative. Purper demanded a modern marriage, a modern career, and modern adventures without reflecting on the wider ramifications of the political system that made such demands available to her as a privileged individual. Boveri pursued her ambition with great dedication to the detriment of her political principles. Their realization of the mythologized independence that adventure promised the German traveler, but also the emancipated woman, in the late 1930s and early 1940s was available only if they were prepared to live out their adventurous narrative within a Nazi framework that, while certainly wide enough to accommodate personal individuality, was by no means limitless.

In the meantime, other mythologies oftentimes stayed intact, including the actual foreign settings of their travels, which functioned as much as backdrops as they did destinations. Whether they were looking to enjoy themselves, improve their craft, or gain a professional promotion, it is no surprise that these adventures revolved around the women themselves rather than their destinations. Their own lives were what they felt they had control over. When Purper suffered from the fleas aboard the “Franz Schubert,” she never forgot that she had chosen to be there, and yet the fleabites increased her level of self-involvement. Always so keen to devour the world herself, now she felt she was the one being eaten alive. The fleabites turned Purper’s focus inward on her itching body and reinforced her assessment of the Dobruja Germans as supporting characters in her story. Perhaps here, then, lies the essence of adventure for the German writers and photographers traveling abroad, fueled by their demand for adrenaline and for independence: exerting agency over their adventure stories was a source of personal empowerment, but the individualism inherent in that idea also allowed them to characterize other people as supplementary to their stories in a manner that complemented the interests of the Nazi regime.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank Nick Stargardt and Martin Conway for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article. This work was conducted with the generous support of the German Academic Scholarship Foundation and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

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Cite this article: Katharina Friege. "Of *Fernweh* and Fleabites: German Female Journalists in Pursuit of Adventure, 1937–1942," *Central European History* 56, no. 4 (December 2023): 573–594. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938922001728>.