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# Family and communism in Maria Leitner's *Mädchen mit drei Namen* and Hermynia Zur Mühlen's *Lina: Erzählung aus dem Leben eines Dienstmädchens*

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## Abstract

This article analyses the portrayal of the impact of capitalism on the working-class family and the promotion of the communist movement as a form of surrogate family in Maria Leitner's *Mädchen mit drei Namen* (1932) and Hermynia Zur Mühlen's *Lina: Erzählung aus dem Leben eines Dienstmädchens* (1924). Reading these two Weimar-era texts as works of *Gebrauchsliteratur*, which seek to promote communism to a young female readership, I argue that, despite urging greater female participation in the male-dominated sphere of left-wing political action, Leitner and Zur Mühlen rely on normative ideas about gender to advocate political engagement to a demographic assumed to be politically naïve or disinterested. With reference to Weimar-era cultural discourses and strategies of the communist movement, I contest that both novellas are contradictory in their claim to represent a radically progressive political position while simultaneously failing to challenge fundamentally conservative gender norms.

## Keywords

communist fiction, family, female readership, *Gebrauchsliteratur*, Maria Leitner, Weimar, Hermynia Zur Mühlen

Which books should we give our children? This question was posed in the communist daily newspaper *Berlin am Morgen* in 1931 and exemplifies attempts by the far left in Weimar Germany to create and promote a cultural output that would stimulate support for its political message. Initial contributions to this cultural project were not centrally coordinated, but the foundation of the Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller

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(The Association of Proletarian Revolutionary Writers) (BPRS) in 1928 represented the beginning of a coherent strategy (Fähnders and Rector, 1974: 154–6). The BPRS adopted a Marxist-Leninist conception of literature with the intention of promoting the literary activity of the revolutionary proletariat (Klein, 1973: 24; Gallas, 1971: 32) and formed part of an international left-wing endeavour during the 1920s to promote revolutionary literature (Klein, 1973: 21). Its membership included journalists, poets and authors producing socialist fiction, including children's fiction (Hein, 1991: 64).

Among the respondents to the question in *Berlin am Morgen* was the author and BPRS member Hermynia Zur Mühlen, who argued that a good children's book should possess the same characteristics as every other good, belletristic book: 'Connection to the time and to life, an unambiguous attitude, a lively, captivating story. Moreover, it must be an effective antidote to the contemporary school and class up-bringing' (cited in Altner, 1997: 95).<sup>1</sup> As a prolific left-wing writer, including of children's fiction, Zur Mühlen had reflected on and sought to meet the perceived need for appealing children's stories that include a strong left-wing political message. In a 1919 essay entitled 'Junge-Mädchen-Literatur' ('Literature for Young Girls'), Zur Mühlen (2019: 12–14) suggests that young people are hungry for ideals and bemoans the inherent conservatism of the mainstream offering of literature for girls and young women.

This article examines two Weimar-era contributions to left-wing efforts to provide an alternative literary offering for girls and young women: Hermynia Zur Mühlen's *Lina: Erzählung aus dem Leben eines Dienstmädchens* ('Lina: A Story from the Life of a Housemaid') (1924) and Maria Leitner's *Mädchen mit drei Namen* ('Girl with Three Names') (1932). Situating the novellas in the context of Weimar-era political writing, I analyse the strategies adopted to encourage female left-wing political engagement, foregrounding the portrayal of the threat posed to working-class families by capitalist social structures and the presentation of the communist movement as a form of surrogate family. These themes expose a tension in both texts between the reliance on normative ideas about women's primary identification with the private sphere to frame the political message in terms assumed to be more appealing to a female readership and the promotion of female participation in the male-dominated realm of political action. I argue that, despite the inclusion of positive examples of women's independent communist activity, neither text radically rejects gender stereotypes, resulting in a failure to overcome the ingrained, misogynistic assumptions of women's limited political ability which saw them consigned to a supporting role in the communist movement.

Despite repeated efforts by the communist movement to attract women to their ranks, women remained a minority in the German Communist Party (KPD) throughout the Weimar period and women's membership in the KPD peaked at 16.5 per cent in 1929 (Sewell, 2012: 280). The Weimar political landscape remained divided along gender lines and Sewell (2012: 274–5) notes a reluctance among communist men to fully integrate women into the movement, relegating them instead to a role that Sewell terms 'adjunct revolutionaries'. The Weimar period offered new opportunities and political rights for women, yet normative ideas of gender, which continued to associate women with caring, maternal qualities and domestic duties, persisted. Marie Juchacz, leader of the social democratic women's movement, emphasized welfare as an area upon which women should focus their attention and, as the first woman to address the Weimar

National Assembly in 1919, she assured her audience that women would not lose their femininity with their entry into the political arena (Pore, 1981: 34). Similarly, communist women were encouraged to engage with issues such as ‘the prices of everyday goods, women’s wages, welfare, and reproductive rights’ (Sewell, 2012: 269). This represented a continuation of the charitable social welfare work performed by middle-class feminists in the pre-World War I period, restricted women’s political ambitions to areas in which women’s participation was already established, and reflected conservative ideas about gender roles which remained widespread throughout the Weimar period and across the political spectrum, including within the communist movement. The KPD prioritized fighting class inequality over addressing gender discrimination. For example, Clara Zetkin (2015: 45), a prominent figure in the communist women’s movement, argued in 1920–21: ‘Communism, the great saviour of the female sex . . . can only be achieved by the joint class struggle of the women and men of the exploited proletariat against the privileges and power of men and women of the propertied and exploiting classes.’ Indeed, the left-wing women’s movements were accused of privileging the class struggle over the eradication of gender inequality in both contemporary criticism (for example, Rühle-Gerstel, 1932: 142) and later historical commentary (for example, Gruber and Graves, 1998: 9). Typical of the left-wing approach to women’s political engagement was the assumption of women’s political naivety, which explains the focus on domestic and welfare issues in the activities and pamphlets targeted at a female audience, as well as the framing of the appeal to women in the primary texts discussed here in familial terms. The prevalence of conservative ideas about gender roles during the Weimar era is frequently overlooked or understated due to the emphasis on the Republic’s newfound freedoms for so-called ‘new women’, of which in fact only a small and typically more privileged proportion of women were able to take advantage. This article calls into question the assumption of the universal appeal of the new woman’s lifestyle by showing that, rather than co-opting as aspirational the image of the independent new woman, Zur Mühlen and Leitner draw on community and family values to engage young women. Their position is thus consistent with the communist appeal to shared values of community but does little to advance women’s opportunities or gender equality.

A number of historical studies have examined women’s involvement in Weimar-era communism and socialism, and left-wing approaches to gender, including Renate Pore (1981), Gruber and Graves (1998), Sewell (2012) and Offen (2000), to show that essentialist notions of gender were largely unchallenged in the left-wing political movements of the period. Yet, in-depth analysis of women’s participation in left-wing cultural production remains an underexplored area of scholarship in which further study would be productive. In this article, I address this question in relation to the attempts to promote the communist message to a female readership in two examples of left-wing political fiction.

Both *Mädchen mit drei Namen* and *Lina: Erzählung aus dem Leben eines Dienstmädchens* are coming-of-age narratives, in which the protagonists’ relocations from their rural childhood homes to large cities force them to confront the realities of class inequality and social and economic crisis. Zur Mühlen’s *Lina: Erzählung aus dem Leben eines Dienstmädchens* follows the protagonist, Lina, through a series of domestic postings as a housemaid, beginning during the Wilhelmine period when 16-year-old Lina

is sent from her rural home in the Black Forest to work for the uncompromising wife of an army major in Frankfurt. The story, serialized in the communist newspaper *Arbeiterstimme* in 1924 before being published in book form by the *Internationaler Arbeiter-Verlag* in 1926, spans a 23-year period and ends during the Weimar era when Lina commits suicide upon learning that her ill health will prevent her from working. The time period of the narrative enables Zur Mühlen to show the continuity in the experiences of working-class girls and women before and during the Weimar period, thus implying that more radical restructuring of society is necessary to ameliorate the conditions of girls like Lina. The novella warns of the dangers of political inactivity in the face of the exploitation of the working class. Lina is dehumanized by the treatment she receives from her upper-middle- and upper-class employers, working ‘like a machine’ (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 56)<sup>2</sup> and ultimately ends her own life as she can see no future for herself in the world if she can no longer work.

Like Zur Mühlen’s novella, Leitner’s *Mädchen mit drei Namen* focuses on the struggles of a working-class girl but offers a more optimistic conclusion, suggesting that collective class action will improve the opportunities and living conditions for working-class girls like Lina, Leitner’s protagonist who shares her name with Zur Mühlen’s titular character. The use of these repeated ‘everygirl’ names reveals an attempt to increase the identification of the target readership with the protagonists. In Leitner’s short story, which was serialized in the communist tabloid paper *Die Welt am Abend* in 1932 and published in book form for the first time only in 2013, Lina runs away from her provincial life in Cottbus to seek a better future in Berlin. However, against the backdrop of the depression that gripped Germany in the late Weimar period, Lina struggles to find suitable accommodation or work. She repeatedly comes into contact with the social welfare office (*Pflegeamt*) from where she is finally sent to live at a convent. At the convent, she befriends Anna, a communist who was arrested for her involvement in strike action. Together, Anna and Lina secure their expulsion from the convent by criticizing the greed of the Catholic church and the story ends on a hopeful note as Lina, under the guidance of Anna and her brother Franz, joins the communist movement and declares herself ready to play her part in the class struggle. The novella is narrated in the first person by Lina. Through Lina’s observations and reflective commentary on her experiences and the people she meets, the reader is able to witness Lina’s personal development and is encouraged to note the positive impact of her political awakening on her life.

Both Leitner and Zur Mühlen used their writing as a tool to promote their left-wing politics. Zur Mühlen joined the KPD in 1919. However, as Shoultz (2018: 183) explains, Zur Mühlen’s understanding of socialism was broad, and indeed, Zur Mühlen withdrew from the KPD in the early 1930s.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, at the time of writing *Lina*, she subscribed to the politics of the KPD. Leitner was also active in the communist movement, although there are conflicting reports about the extent of her involvement. She joined the BPRS in 1928 (Killet and Schwarz, 2013: 136) and Schwarz’s biographical essay on Leitner (1989) refers to her membership of the KPD. Yet there is no known record of the date at which she joined the party and Leitner herself claimed in a letter dated 20 May 1941 (cited in Killet and Schwarz, 2013: 43) that she had never been a member of a political party. She was, however, seeking to obtain a visa to enter the USA at this time, having fled fascist Germany, so it is possible that Leitner’s assertion in this letter was

expedient to her changed circumstances. Leitner's journalistic work nevertheless reveals her support of communism and *Mädchen mit drei Namen* was published in the communist press.

Given their foregrounding of working-class experiences and promotion of communism, both Zur Mühlen's *Lina* and Leitner's *Mädchen mit drei Namen* should be viewed as examples of *Gebrauchsliteratur*. This formed part of the wider *neue Sachlichkeit* (new objectivity) movement and is hence realist in style. Within this genre, fiction and non-fiction elements can be blurred, thereby rooting the texts in their historical and social context. Furthermore, these texts tend to avoid extended descriptive passages and aim for linguistic precision. As *Gebrauchsliteratur* serves a didactic function, the language and narratives are intended to be accessible to, and reflect the lived experiences of, a wide working-class and lower-middle-class readership. Sewell (2012: 279) notes that the KPD sought to engage women using 'a 'simple language' that a female audience could readily understand', further revealing a patronizing assessment of women's ability to comprehend political messaging. The conversational tone, linear and episodic structure, and short length of the texts make them accessible to a readership that may have had little leisure time for reading or a limited education. While Leitner opts for a first-person narrative, Zur Mühlen's text has an omniscient third-person narrator, who gives insights into the thoughts and attitudes of the characters but also offers commentary on events in the story to steer the reader towards the intended political conclusions. Moreover, the serialization of both texts in the communist press enabled them to reach a larger audience who would have had limited resources to buy books.

The features of *Gebrauchsliteratur* correspond to the literary strategy of the BPRS but do not reflect a standardized international left-wing approach to the politicization of culture during the interwar years. Although the BPRS was influenced by developments in cultural policy taking place in Russia and the international communist community (Hein, 1991), texts produced in Germany during this period do not typically adopt a socialist realist framework which was emerging in Russia from 1929. As Evgeny Dobrenko (2011: 110) explains, socialist realism 'produced the symbolic values of socialism instead of its reality'. The idealized narratives common in socialist realism contrast with the sobriety of *neue Sachlichkeit* and *Gebrauchsliteratur*, which sought to reflect the challenges of the present rather than a desired future socialist reality. While Leitner's text ends on an optimistic note, the text acknowledges the hardships Lina faces and recognizes the upcoming struggles in which Lina will have to engage to bring a socialist future into existence. Central to *Gebrauchsliteratur*, as Sabina Becker (2002: 89) writes, is the de-sentimentalization (*Entsentimentalisierung*) and de-individualization (*Entindividualisierung*) of literature, which is visible in the unsentimental, at times even pessimistic, portrayal of the opportunities available to young working-class women during the Weimar period. The repetition of common names such as the protagonists' Lina and Leitner's and Zur Mühlen's use of tropes such as the communist movement as a family in these texts also reflect the authors' attempts to de-individualize their narratives and give the impression that they are telling a shared story.

Zur Mühlen's text also incorporates aspects of *Mädchenliteratur* (literature for girls). The production of *Mädchenliteratur* had grown rapidly in the nineteenth century and drew heavily on the idea that its readership would identify with the young middle-class,



female protagonists who were to serve as an example of how young women should, and indeed sometimes should not, behave (Drake Askey, 2013). The dominance of middle-class and conservative perspectives in fiction aimed at women and girls was not exclusively a German phenomenon. For example, the emergence of so-called middle-brow fiction in Britain was, as Nicola Humble (2004), Hilary Hinds (2015) and Kristin Ewins (2015) among others have noted, largely aimed at a middle-class female readership and frequently preoccupied with themes of domesticity. Yet, as Ewins (2015) shows, attempts were made by some women writers of middle-brow fiction to promote a socialist message through their writing in the interwar period and parallels can therefore be drawn between the literary strategies employed by left-wing writers in Weimar Germany, including Zur Mühlen, and their counterparts in other countries. As an intended counterpoint to the hugely popular *Mädchenliteratur* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Else Ury's *Nesthäkchen* series (1912–25) or Angela Brazil's boarding-school novels in Britain (published between 1904 and 1946), Zur Mühlen produced a number of texts, of which *Lina* is one, that she referred to as her *Propagandaerzählungen* (propaganda stories). She references the tropes common to *Mädchenliteratur*, including characters who represent familiar types and the portrayal of everyday scenarios, but transposes them into a working-class, rather than middle-class, environment. Ailsa Wallace (2009: 129) argues that Zur Mühlen seeks to 'demythologize the ideology of romantic love, marriage, and motherhood' central to mainstream, socially conservative fiction for girls and young women, and further to suggest alternative goals. Yet, in the following, I analyse the appeal to domestic and familial themes to advance the political message of these two examples of communist fiction for girls and young women, exposing the contradictions between the aims and practice in these novellas.

### The capitalist threat to the working-class family

The appeal to readers in both *Mädchen mit drei Namen* and *Lina* is rooted in familial terms and the authors allude to the perceived threat of capitalism to the working-class family to attract their readers' support to their political cause. Throughout the Weimar period and across the political spectrum, conservative, idealized notions of women's domestic capacities and duties remained widespread. In the wake of the First World War, maternalist policies emphasized women's perceived inherent caring nature and the women's movements presented arguments rooted in essentialist ideas of gender to argue for women's greater role in society as healers of the nation. Women thus remained strongly associated with mothering and the private sphere during the Weimar era. These two texts should be read within the context of widespread maternalist and essentialist assumptions about women's political interests. While young women were not typically the target readership of communist fiction during the Weimar era, and both texts should therefore be viewed as attempting a novel strategy, their reliance on normative ideas of gender locates these novellas within a wider body of propaganda from across the political spectrum that appealed to women to help save the family unit.

Both Zur Mühlen and Leitner establish the impact of economic hardship on the unity of the working-class family in the opening passages of their novellas. Leitner's *Lina* describes her family in terms of 'lack of space, quarrelling, yelling' (Leitner, 2013: 143),<sup>4</sup>

revealing immediately an emotional distance between herself and her relations and refuting an idealized conception of domestic harmony. This emotional distance is cemented by the physical distance that appears when Lina runs away to seek a better life in Berlin. Lina and her mother do not see each other in person again in the novella, which breaks a tradition of collaboration and shared domestic burdens between female generations, with young women frequently remaining in the parental home until their marriage. This highlights the disruption to family harmony caused by the economic need for children to work and, in the case of Lina's family, the limited opportunities in their home town. The omission of an idealized depiction of Lina's mother and her absence from the majority of the novella also reveals a refusal on Leitner's part to endorse the model of mothering associated with the protagonist's (and intended readers') mother's generation. Through the mother's absence, Leitner asserts that a radical break with the society of Lina's childhood is necessary to enable the social change that she advocates.

Yet despite the emotional and physical distance between Lina and her parents, Leitner's text underscores that social circumstances are ultimately to blame. As first-person narrator, Lina mitigates her criticism of her family environment: 'Today I understand everything better, but back then I was only bitter and hated them' (Leitner, 2013: 143).<sup>5</sup> This quotation signals to the reader that the narrative will detail Lina's personal development and emphasizes that external social circumstances, rather than malicious intent, causes her parents to act as they do. This introduces the reader to Leitner's criticism of the impact of capitalist social structures on the private sphere, particularly for working-class families in which the extreme poverty experienced during the late Weimar period prevented mothers from living up to the idealized images of doting motherhood. As a work of *Gebrauchsliteratur*, the novella focuses on the tensions caused within the biological family by challenging social and economic conditions. As the novella was targeted at a young, female readership, who were intended to recognize themselves in Lina, Leitner's text seeks to offer her reader a political explanation for events and emotions she may have experienced first-hand, while assuming that offering a means to repair and protect the family unit will appeal to a female audience.

Similarly, economic need is portrayed as the cause of distance between Zur Mühlen's Lina and her mother. In *Lina*, it is the mother, not the daughter, who initiates the distance between the generations by sending Lina away to Frankfurt at the age of 16 to work in domestic service. Initially, Lina feels homesick in Frankfurt (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 14), which demonstrates that, unlike in *Mädchen mit drei Namen*, the physical distance between Lina and her family precedes the development of emotional distance in Zur Mühlen's text. The distance, emotional and physical, between Lina and her mother is not presented as an inevitable consequence of Lina growing up and leaving home but was rather expedited by the unfavourable social circumstances that forced Lina to work away from the family home at a young age. Zur Mühlen thus echoes Leitner's criticism that capitalism impacts negatively on the unity of working-class families.

Citing the threat to the family unit posed by contemporary society was a tactic used across the political spectrum to attract women during the Weimar era and Zur Mühlen's and Leitner's appeals therefore do not represent a communist innovation in political campaigning. Indeed, the women's magazine of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), *Frauenwelt*, ran a double page spread of photographs in 1933 under the heading 'Women,



Mothers! This is how the economic crisis is destroying your families. Fight in unity for a better future!’<sup>6</sup> The accompanying photographs contrast overcrowded accommodation and hungry children with cheerful children at workers’ sports events and a smiling mother holding a healthy baby to demonstrate the benefits that the social democratic movement can bring to family life. Likewise, the National Socialists sought to attract women’s votes in 1932 with an election poster reading ‘Women! Save the German Family’ (‘Frauen! Rettet die deutsche Familie’), depicting a mother holding her baby and standing protectively over her older child and downcast husband. While the imagery used by the left-wing campaigns references more modern styles of dress and pastimes, and the precise nature of the perceived threat to the family differs, the underlying message and assumption of women’s primary interest in domestic matters is consistent. Thus we can see that, despite positioning themselves as politically progressive, Zur Mühlen’s and Leitner’s novellas form part of a wider, more socially conservative strategy of appealing to domestic themes to attract women’s political support. This reveals the contradiction at the heart of both novellas. The communist message of the texts calls for a rejection of society in its contemporary form but remains rooted in essentialist assumptions by appealing to women’s presumed desire to protect family unity. In line with the priorities of the communist party, the texts privilege class struggles over gender inequality, thereby missing the opportunity to incorporate a more explicitly feminist perspective.

To highlight the threat posed to the working-class family by capitalism, both Zur Mühlen and Leitner depict a domestic environment that contains conflict and intergenerational tensions. The mother of Zur Mühlen’s Lina in particular is portrayed critically. As Lina becomes accustomed to her life in the city, and becomes increasingly aware of social inequality, her homesickness fades and she instead begins to resent her mother, who, having sent her daughter away from the family home, continues to claim Lina’s wages: ‘She also no longer felt longing for her family . . . In fact, she sometimes resented her mother: should you give life to your children, when it is a life like this?’ (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 35).<sup>7</sup> Lina’s changing attitude introduces ambivalence into her relationship with her mother and signals an attempt by Lina to distance herself and develop an independent identity. This passage, in which the narrator adopts Lina’s perspective, also places the blame for this situation on the mothers who bring children into a challenging environment. While the text moves away from an idealized portrayal of motherhood in Lina’s mother, this episode exposes its reliance on conservative ideas about women’s primary responsibility for ensuring their children’s wellbeing. Criticism appears to be more directed towards women of the pre-World War I generation in Zur Mühlen’s text than in Leitner’s. Zur Mühlen’s focus on the perspectives of her intended young female readership and her attempts to promote their future political engagement, rather than discussing the wider social circumstances and limited opportunities or education available to women of their mothers’ generation, leaves the challenges faced by the pre-World War I generation unexplored. By eschewing this discussion, Zur Mühlen’s priority in *Lina* is appealing to a younger generation. While she shows the particular ways in which women are impacted by economic inequality, her text foregrounds the class struggle as the means to improve the lives of working-class women and largely avoids framing her social criticism in explicitly feminist terms.

The criticism of Lina's mother's behaviour in Zur Mühlen's text further highlights the impact of economic inequality on working-class family life, as financial hardship forces working-class parents to treat their children as economic resources. Zur Mühlen's depiction of Lina's experiences are a literary illustration of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' assertion in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848; English translation 1888: 19–20) that 'by the action of Modern Industry, all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour'. Through her portrayal of Lina's family, Zur Mühlen seeks to present the ideas of Marx and Engels in an accessible way. Throughout the novella, Lina's labour is repeatedly exploited by her mother, who feels entitled to Lina's earnings, as well as by her employers and, during her short-lived engagement, her fiancé. The mother's behaviour contradicts stereotypical, idealized images of protective, nurturing motherhood, which, as Wallace (2009: 113) argues, 'is revealed as a luxury that Lina's mother cannot afford to express'. As Wallace's analysis hints, the acceptance of implicitly conservative notions of 'the good mother' are present in Zur Mühlen's text, and indeed are used here to advance the criticism of the impact of capitalism on working-class familial relations.

As in Zur Mühlen's text, Leitner's Lina's mother secures her daughter's first job, working as an apprentice in a local shop, demonstrating again the reliance of working-class parents on their children's income. Moreover, the suggestion that children of working age who are not contributing financially become a burden is raised in an episode in which the welfare office in Berlin contacts Lina's mother to request funds for Lina to travel back to her home town, Cottbus. This is impossible, as Lina explains: 'The journey home would be a large part of their whole weekly income and, if they sent it to me, all they would have is one more mouth to feed, nothing more' (Leitner, 2013: 172–3).<sup>8</sup> Lina's mother rejects the request to send money for Lina's journey, instead asking that the money be lent to Lina who can work to pay it back (2013: 173). The inability and unwillingness of Lina's parents to financially support a child of working age underscores how economic considerations threaten the unity of working-class families. Yet, Leitner's Lina recognizes the financial burden that she will place on her parents should she return home, and, furthermore, she attributes blame for this to the wider economic situation and lack of work available in her home town.

In *Lina*, the treatment of children as economic resources fosters tensions, illustrating the damaging consequences for working-class families, and Zur Mühlen's novella is somewhat more critical of working-class parents than *Mädchen mit drei Namen*. Zur Mühlen underscores the dehumanizing impact of social inequality and economic hardship on working-class family experiences through the treatment of Lina as a burden by her family when she is briefly unemployed and returns home: 'The mother had become old, sickly and tired . . . Lina noticed that she was not welcome. Bitterly she thought: "You wanted to have my money but when I want to rest for once, there is no space for me with you"' (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 50).<sup>9</sup> As Wallace (2009: 112) writes, 'Zur Mühlen points out that family values are, to a large extent, dependent on socio-economic relations. The rural, working poor . . . are obliged to view family members primarily in terms of their earning potential.' Zur Mühlen's novella portrays a situation that was intended to appear relatable to her contemporary intended readership. Furthermore, despite dutifully sacrificing her wages, Lina resents her mother, whose financial reliance

on Lina prevents her from accessing the same luxuries as her fourth employer, Frau Kirchner: 'Why can't she dress nicely like this other woman? She has worked hard for 7 years now – she didn't count the work back home – hasn't she also earned nice clothes, hats, silk stockings?' (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 40).<sup>10</sup> The inequality present in capitalist society is highlighted in the contrast between Frau Kirchner's ability to enjoy a luxurious lifestyle without working and Lina's lack of disposable income despite working long hours since her teenage years. Lina's indignation, revealed through the narrative adoption of her perspective, is given legitimacy by appealing to the shared experiences of girls in Lina's position, who, it is implied, would give the same answers to the rhetorical questions posed by Lina. Thus, Zur Mühlen offers a political explanation for the unfair discrepancy in access to luxury items identified by Lina. This episode also serves as a warning about the negative impact on interpersonal relationships of a culture which over-values material possessions.

Zur Mühlen's Lina's frustrations are echoed by Leitner's Lina, whose lack of independence and opportunities in her home town informs her decision to travel to Berlin in pursuit of the new woman lifestyle. Yet both novellas expose the myth of women's increasing financial independence during the Weimar era, personified in popular fictional characters such as Irmgard Keun's eponymous character Gilgi (1931), or the titular figure in Vicki Baum's *Stud. chem. Helene Willfuer* (1928). While the young women in these mainstream novels maintain their financial independence through work and savings, the reality for many women in Weimar Germany, particularly those from working-class backgrounds as signalled in Zur Mühlen's and Leitner's novellas, was that disposable financial means were limited. Lina is confronted by a lack of suitable work available in Berlin and Leitner's text offers its readers an alternative aspiration to that of the glamorous new woman. Exposing a further contradiction in the apparently progressive politics presented in these two novellas, these texts do not offer a route for women, regardless of class background, to access the greater independence portrayed in popular culture and available only to a small proportion of privileged women. Instead, as will be discussed in the next section, Zur Mühlen and Leitner advocate a return to the family by presenting the communist movement as a surrogate family into which the protagonists would be integrated. Thus, despite their advocacy of social change, neither text radically challenges gender stereotypes, relying instead on the assumption that presenting the communist movement as a form of surrogate family and saviour of the working-class family will appeal to a female readership supposedly more oriented towards the private sphere.

## The communist surrogate family

In contrast to the protagonists' families, who are remote and unnurturing, representatives of the communist movement in *Lina* and *Mädchen mit drei Namen* are welcoming and caring, taking on supporting roles typically allocated to mothers and sisters, guiding the protagonists as they learn how to interpret the inequalities and injustices in the world around them. In their portrayal of the communist movement as a family support unit, these texts further demystify the image of the independent new woman. Instead of mimicking the aspirational presentation of independence and self-sufficiency found in Keun's

and Baum's mainstream novels, the texts advocate collaboration and collective political activity. Yet, while Leitner's and Zur Mühlen's texts present themselves as progressive, they fail to break down gender stereotypes, promoting political activity within the confines of gender norms. In this contradiction, they reflect the strategy of the KPD during the Weimar era, which maintained separate spheres of activity for men and women, and reveal how deeply ingrained gender conservatism remained during this period, even in texts that claimed to challenge bourgeois values.

Zur Mühlen's Lina first comes into contact with the caring, maternal face of socialism in her second employer, an elderly French woman called Fräulein Yvette. Fräulein Yvette affectionately calls Lina 'my child' ('mein Kind') (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 19) and helps Lina with the cooking and cleaning. In the evenings they sit and eat together, creating a communal, familial atmosphere. Fräulein Yvette's concern that Lina takes time to rest and relax contrasts with Lina's mother's uncompromising attitude towards her daughter's work. Lina is surprised by Fräulein Yvette's behaviour after her experiences with her first employer. She wonders: 'Isn't a woman mad if she treats the maid like her own child, takes care that the maid doesn't work too hard, sends the maid to walk in the park when the weather is nice, regardless of whether it's her day off or not?' (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 21).<sup>11</sup> Lina's confusion shows Zur Mühlen's concerns about how deeply ingrained class divisions were and suggests that girls like Lina are poorly equipped to challenge social inequality. Zur Mühlen's didactic novella seeks to address this by offering young women a form of political education. She explicitly presents Fräulein Yvette's adherence to socialist values as the cause of her caring, motherly behaviour towards Lina.

Similarly, the notion of a communist family is evoked through the other left-wing characters with whom Lina comes into contact; like Fräulein Yvette, they are friendly, generous and supportive. For example, she visits a socialist doctor, Dr Kohn, who helps her find a new job with better conditions (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 38), and by the end of the novella Kati, Lina's communist friend, is 'the only person to whom Lina still felt in any way connected' (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 56).<sup>12</sup> Kati remains a loyal friend to Lina and is the only one of her acquaintances to attend her burial, again adopting the role of a family member.

Kati also serves as a counterpoint to Lina in Zur Mühlen's didactic scheme, as Wallace (2009: 116) insightfully outlines in her analysis of Zur Mühlen's socialist *Mädchenbücher* (books for girls). While Lina is perpetually exhausted and shows physical signs of ageing, Kati remains youthful despite being a mother of four (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 56). Kati encourages Lina to join her political cause, but years of exploitation have left Lina without the energy to engage (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 57) and she therefore serves as a warning to Zur Mühlen's readership about the risks of accepting the status quo. Wallace (2009: 110) notes that Zur Mühlen's portrayal of Kati 'oppose[s] the characterization of women as 'Hemmschuh der politischen Arbeit des Mannes' [a stumbling block to men's political work] in most proletarian-revolutionary literature.' Indeed, Zur Mühlen offers her readers, through Kati, an example of a woman autonomously and confidently following her political convictions and actively engaging with party politics. In this portrayal, and despite relying on certain conservative notions of gender in the text, Zur Mühlen subtly questions the continued left-wing attachment to the notion of women's limited aptitude for political activity. In contrast to Lina, Kati offers a positive model for women's

political activity and Zur Mühlen thus demonstrates to her readership that there is a place for women within the communist movement. Nevertheless, the implication that Kati's political work centres around the communist youth group (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 59) confines her engagement to the areas identified as more suitable for women's participation by party leaders.

In Leitner's *Mädchen mit drei Namen*, the communist movement is similarly portrayed as a surrogate family. Having demonstrated how the capitalist system damages working-class families, preventing Lina's family from offering the emotional support that she craves, Leitner also demonstrates the failings of the state institutions such as the welfare office that purport to care for those most in need. These institutions are portrayed as out of touch and ineffective. When officials suggest that Lina's family should come to Berlin to collect her, Lina repeatedly uses the phrase 'they don't know' ('Sie wissen nicht') when explaining the financial barriers to this plan (Leitner, 2013: 172). By demonstrating the inadequacies of the current system, Leitner strengthens her political call for a communist remodelling of society. Indeed the ineffectiveness of the existing system is exposed by the acts of resistance performed by the interned girls and women in the *Fürsorgeheim* (home for the destitute): 'Everyone took particular pleasure in destroying what she'd just done as soon as she thought nobody was watching' (Leitner, 2013: 175).<sup>13</sup> Julian Preece's (2014: 258) analysis of *Mädchen mit drei Namen* in his biographical essay on Leitner offers helpful insight, emphasizing that, in Leitner's writing, 'institutions denote power, which is exercised over people stripped of their individuality'. Preece (2014: 259) underlines that each time Lina comes into contact with another institution 'she is allotted a role that she has not chosen and is required to live and work according to an imposed set of rules and procedures'. Building on Preece's analysis, it can be seen that Lina's negative experiences with state institutions and while living with her own family draws out Leitner's criticism of the negative impacts of capitalist social structures on working-class girls and their families.

Lina's internment in a convent, following repeated run-ins with the police and welfare office, also introduces criticism of the church and renders more stark the appeal of the communist alternative embodied in Anna, a communist who was arrested for her involvement in strike action. Leitner portrays Anna's politics as the reason for her successful negotiation of the convent experience. During hymns, Anna sings the text to revolutionary songs, offering a more productive act of resistance than that of the women in the *Fürsorgeheim*. Anna explains to Lina: 'When I sing, I become strong, then the people here lose their power and authority over me, then I know that I'm not alone . . . that I am marching among millions, who have the same goal as me' (Leitner, 2013: 200).<sup>14</sup> This underscores the support system provided to an individual by the communist movement and Anna welcomes Lina into this community after they secure their release from the convent by criticizing the church, causing the mother superior to expel them. Melching (1990: 75) notes that many left-wing intellectuals were critical of the church's continued social influence during the Weimar era and Leitner's criticism of religion therefore contributes to a substantial body of left-wing criticism of the church.

Anna offers Lina a home in both the physical and emotional sense, and, like Fräulein Yvette in Zur Mühlen's novella, Anna and her brother Franz provide Lina with the family-style support that she has been missing. Through Anna and Franz, Leitner presents

the communist movement as non-threatening and familial, thereby encouraging female political engagement in stereotypically gendered terms. Lina immediately feels welcome and comfortable: 'as though I had come home, to my true home' (Leitner, 2013: 205).<sup>15</sup> The communist community is thus able to provide Lina with the comforting and supportive environment that her own family could not. Having established the threat posed to working-class families by a capitalist system, Leitner offers communism as the means to rebuild a working-class family.

Rejecting the independent (and privileged) lifestyle of the new woman, and instead praising the sense of community accessible, they assert, through the communist movement, Leitner and Zur Mühlen provide an alternative aspirational image to the mainstream (middle-class) new woman and fulfil Zur Mühlen's and the BPRS's calls for an alternative left-wing cultural offering. Yet this strategy is contradictory and Zur Mühlen advances the very glorification, albeit in a different class setting, of women's familial role that she criticizes in her 1919 essay on bourgeois *Mädchenliteratur*.

Moreover, these texts reflect the KPD's patronizing assessment of women's political knowledge and understanding. Despite being authored by politically informed women, these novellas assume that their readership requires an explanation of political principles, which is provided by members of the 'communist family'. Fräulein Yvette, for example, introduces Lina to the concepts of socialism and Lina's lack of prior knowledge of politics serves as a device for Zur Mühlen to explain these concepts to her young readership. Through Fräulein Yvette and Lina's interactions, Zur Mühlen seeks to draw attention to and counter what she identifies as the biased information propagated by the capitalist state and the conservatism of mainstream literature for girls. Lina's naïve, simplistic response to Fräulein Yvette's revelation that her grandfather had fought in the French Revolution illustrates Zur Mühlen's criticism of the prejudice of the education system. Lina says: 'Ah yes . . . that was back when the bad people beheaded the poor king and queen' (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 23).<sup>16</sup> Through Fräulein Yvette, Zur Mühlen calls into question the accuracy of the information imparted through schools: 'They [teachers] are in the pay of the successors to the courts and the nobility' (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 23).<sup>17</sup> The exposure of Lina, and through her Zur Mühlen's readership, to Fräulein Yvette's political perspectives puts into practice the author's call for a socialist response to popular bourgeois literature for girls.

Just as Fräulein Yvette explains the aims of socialism to Zur Mühlen's Lina, Anna and Franz educate Leitner's Lina about socialism, helping her to understand the difficulties and injustices she faces as an individual within the wider social context by providing her with books and newspapers, and taking her to meetings. Furthermore, as in Zur Mühlen's text, the reader is also given access to this education through the protagonist's experiences. Unlike Zur Mühlen's Lina, Leitner's Lina grasps the concepts quickly and her changed thinking is revealed when she goes to visit her former boyfriend Harry in a workhouse. Harry complains that he is surrounded by beggars and prostitutes and that he misses the company of 'respectable people' ('anständige Leute'), to which Lina replies: 'But perhaps they don't think any better of you than you do of them . . . What do you even mean by "respectable people"?' (Leitner, 2013: 207)<sup>18</sup> By challenging Harry's prejudices, Lina demonstrates that she is beginning to recognize the injustices of the established social hierarchy and, through her own questioning, encourages the reader to also consider what it means to be a 'respectable' person.



These developments in Lina's thought are supported and guided by Franz, who encourages Lina, and indeed the reader, to look critically at the social conditions that leave girls like Lina with few possibilities. After Lina reveals her feelings of shame about her past, Franz explains:

They [the capitalist state and state institutions] wanted you to look only at yourself, to examine yourself, look for your own mistakes . . . You're supposed to look at yourself for the mistakes and not in the world around you, not in the society which forced you into such a life . . . You're supposed to do your penance, lower your eyes and not see the world around you. (Leitner, 2013: 209–10)<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the impact of social structures on the psychological development of an individual is demonstrated. Through Franz, Leitner urges her readership to engage with their political and social circumstances. She seeks to emphasize to her readers the need to participate in left-wing political action in order to create a world in which they will not have to face the same challenges and miscarriages of justice that Lina does, and indeed that they may themselves already have seen first-hand. Leitner's illustration of the difficulties faced by Lina further calls into question the accessibility of the new woman lifestyle that Lina sought by travelling to Berlin. The glamorized, independent lifestyle of the Weimar new woman required financial means that were beyond the reach of many women, particularly in the context of the economic depression of the later Weimar years. In the novella's political messaging, Leitner encourages her readership to redirect their personal aspirations towards a collective goal.

Leitner's text ends on a more optimistic note than Zur Mühlen's as Lina announces: 'Yes, I was ready. The world was becoming wonderfully new to me' (Leitner, 2013: 210).<sup>20</sup> *Mädchen mit drei Namen* encourages its readership to turn to and engage with the communist movement in order to find support and a community. Yet this seemingly novel approach remains reliant on normative ideas of gender. In both Leitner's and Zur Mühlen's novellas, the call for women's participation in the struggle for a radical restructuring of society references established gender roles and omits an explicit demand for the restructuring of gender hierarchies. The implicit assumption that resolving the class struggle would by extension remove gender inequality was typical of communist strategy during this period and limited the inclusion of a more explicitly feminist message in these novellas. The independence of the new woman is not positioned as aspirational in these texts, which instead encourage a more regressive return to the family for women seeking social change.

## Conclusions

As examples of *Gebrauchsliteratur* aimed at a young female readership, Leitner's *Mädchen mit drei Namen* and Zur Mühlen's *Lina: Erzählung aus dem Leben eines Dienstmädchens* seek to present relatable characters and events, which would be recognizable to their readers, and promote women's political engagement in terms which are understandable and appealing. Both Zur Mühlen's and Leitner's Linas are presented as a form of 'everygirl', with whom the readership is encouraged to identify. Through these

two characters, the reader is educated about the inequalities inherent in capitalist society and introduced to the guiding principles of socialism and communism.

In both Zur Mühlen's and Leitner's narratives, the communist movement is presented as a form of surrogate family, which welcomes and nurtures the protagonists. As I have argued, the reliance on familial connotations to promote political activity to a female readership reveals a continued acceptance of conservative ideas about gender roles. While this strategy may represent a pragmatic means for the authors to promote political engagement in a non-threatening way, it does little to advance a model of womanhood that is independent of the private sphere. Indeed, the independence of the new woman, who appeared frequently as an aspirational model of modern womanhood in Weimar popular fiction and mass media, is rejected in favour of the left-wing ideal of community. Both texts include subtle challenges to the prevailing gender hierarchy in their presentation of positive models of women's political activity and foreground the particular difficulties faced by working-class women. Yet neither Zur Mühlen's nor Leitner's novella substantially challenges the KPD's separation of political activity into gendered spheres, in which women were expected to occupy themselves with more 'feminine' questions, such as welfare. In fact, by depicting the destructive impact of social inequality and financial hardship on working-class families, these texts appeal to the need to protect the working-class family to attract young women to communism. Their use of familial notions to promote women's political engagement contributes to the continued, widespread acceptance of essentialist and conservative ideas about gender during the Weimar era.

The texts are bold in their criticism of class inequality but hesitate to present an explicit and radical critique of conventional gender roles. The Weimar period was one of contradictions, instability and inconsistencies, exemplified in the tensions between women's increasing opportunities and access to the public sphere and enduring notions of gender difference and gendered divisions of labour. The attempts of *Lina* and *Mädchen mit drei Namen* to appeal to a young female readership through a combination of radical political advocacy and reliance on normative gender assumptions reflect and reinforce the broader tensions around women's role in Weimar society that left open the door for the return to the fore of profoundly misogynistic policy in the wake of the National Socialist seizure of power at the end of the Republic.

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### Notes

- 1 'Verbundenheit mit Zeit und Leben, eindeutige Einstellung, eine lebendige, fesselnde Fabel. Außerdem muß es ein wirksames Gegengift gegen die heutige Schule und Klassenerziehung sein' (cited in Altner, 1997: 95). All English translations of texts which have not been published in English are my own.
- 2 'wie eine Maschine' (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 56). All quotations in German from *Lina: Erzählung aus dem Leben eines Dienstmädchens* are from the 1926 edition.
- 3 Ailsa Wallace (2009: 117) notes that there is 'no precise record of Zur Mühlen's resignation from the KPD' but later statements from Stefan Klein, Zur Mühlen's second husband, and Johannes R. Becher place her withdrawal from the party in the early 1930s.

- 4 'Enge, Zank, Geschrei' (Leitner, 2013: 143). All quotations in German from *Mädchen mit drei Namen* are from the 2013 edition published as part of a collection of Leitner's journalistic writing from the Weimar era.
- 5 'Heute verstehe ich das alles besser, aber damals war ich nur verbittert und habe sie auch gehaßt' (Leitner, 2013: 143).
- 6 'Frauen, Mütter! So zerstört die Krise Eure Familien. Kämpft vereint für eine bessere Zukunft!' (*Frauenwelt*, 1933).
- 7 'Sie empfand auch keine Sehnsucht mehr nach den Ihren . . . Ja, sie grollte manchmal der Mutter: darf man denn Kindern das Leben schenken, wenn es ein derartiges Leben ist?' (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 35).
- 8 'Die Heimreise, das wäre ein großer Teil ihres ganzen Wocheneinkommens, und wenn sie es mir schicken, haben sie nur noch einen Esser mehr zu Haus, nichts weiter' (Leitner, 2013: 172–3).
- 9 'die Mutter war alt geworden, kränklich und müde . . . Lina merkte, daß sie den Ihren nicht willkommen war. Verbittert dachte sie: "Mein Geld wollt Ihr haben, aber wenn ich einmal rasten will, gibt es für mich bei Euch keinen Platz."' (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 50).
- 10 'Weshalb darf nicht auch sie sich schmücken, wie diese andere Frau? Sie hat nun schon an die sieben Jahre fleißig gearbeitet – die Arbeit daheim rechnete sie nicht – hat sie nicht auch schöne Kleider verdient, Hüte, Seidenstrümpfe?' (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 40).
- 11 'Ist denn eine Frau nicht verrückt, die . . . das Mädchen behandelt wie ein eigenes Kind, darauf achtet, daß es sich nicht überarbeitet, es bei schönem Wetter in den Park spazieren schickt, einerlei, ob sein freier Tag ist oder nicht?' (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 21).
- 12 'der einzige Mensch, mit dem [Lina] sich noch irgendwie verbunden fühlte' (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 56).
- 13 'Jeder machte es besondere Freude, sobald sie sich unbeaufsichtigt fühlte, das, was sie gerade ausgeführt haben, wieder zu zerstören' (Leitner, 2013: 175).
- 14 'Wenn ich singe, werde ich stark, dann verlieren die hier ihre Macht über mich und die Gewalt, dann weiß ich, daß ich nicht allein bin . . . daß ich zwischen Millionen marschiere, die das gleiche Ziel haben wie ich' (Leitner, 2013: 200).
- 15 'als wäre ich heimgekommen in mein wirkliches Zuhause' (Leitner, 2013: 205).
- 16 'Ach ja . . . das war damals, als die bösen Menschen dem armen König und der armen Königin den Kopf abschlugen' (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 23).
- 17 'sie stehen im Sold jener Leute, die die Nachfolger des Hofes und des Adels geworden sind.' (Zur Mühlen, 1926: 23).
- 18 'Aber vielleicht denken sie auch über dich nicht besser als du über sie . . . Was nennst du überhaupt anständige Leute?' (Leitner, 2013: 207).
- 19 'Sie wollten, daß du nur in dich schaust, daß du nur dich prüfst, daß du nur in dir selbst die Fehler suchst . . . Du sollst die Fehler in dir selbst suchen und nicht in der Welt, die dich umgibt, nicht in der Gesellschaft, die dich zu einem solchen Leben zwingt . . . Du sollst Buße tun, die Augen niederschlagen und die Welt um dich nicht sehen' (Leitner, 2013: 209–10).
- 20 'Ja, ich war bereit. Wunderbar neu wurde mir die Welt' (Leitner, 2013: 210).

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