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Christl Cranz, Germany's ski icon of the 1930s: the Nazis' image of the ideal German woman?

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ABSTRACT

Until today, Christl Cranz (1914–2004) is one of the world's most successful female downhill skiers. She competed during the Nazi period: between the years 1934–1939, she won 12 World Championships and the Olympic downhill skiing competition in 1936. After the Second World War, Cranz became Germany's first female ski instructor with an official certificate and the first woman to open a ski school. She also served on the Council of the German Ski Federation as a representative for women's issues for some years and was an international judge for ski competitions. So far no research has been done on Cranz's life. Cranz herself left a published and an unpublished autobiography in which she mainly focused on her career as a skier. She completely left out the political circumstances of her active time. It is known that she received many honours from the Nazis and there are photos of her shown together with the German Reichskanzler, Hitler. This neglect raises such questions as to what extent she was a showpiece athlete and used for Nazi propaganda. Did she – like other public figures of her time – use her fame for her own ideological or athletic goals? Sources show that she had to serve in a French camp for almost one year before she was denazified.

Introduction

In 1991, the virtual International Women's Sports Hall of Fame (run by The Women's Sports Foundation) added the German skier and 1936 gold medal winner at the Olympic Winter Games in downhill skiing, Christl¹ Cranz (1914–2004), to their list. They misspelled her name as 'Crystal'. According to the Women's Sports Hall of Fame, selections are 'made world-wide and are based on achievements, breakthroughs, innovative style and ongoing commitment to the development of women's sports'. What are Christl Cranz's special achievements that qualify her to be on this long list of women athletes? Did those who chose her look at her political background or only at her athletic achievements as it seems? Cranz was a female sport hero during Germany's Nazi period, a period that stands for totalitarianism, suppression, racism, mass murder, which eventually led to the Second World War.

Until today, Christl Cranz has remained one of the world's most successful downhill skiers. Between 1934 and 1939, she won 12 World Championships and the Olympic downhill skiing competition in 1936. After the Second World War, Cranz became Germany's first officially certified female ski instructor, the first woman to open a ski school and the founder of a ski club which she headed as president for almost three decades. She also served on the council of the German Ski Federation (Deutscher Skiverband, DSV) as a representative for women's issues for some years and was an international judge of ski races. Last but not least, she published a number of books on various aspects of skiing, such as ski history, technique and teaching methods.²

Ski historian John B. Allen sees in Christl Cranz the first 'female super star' in alpine skiing (2012). Her sports career took place during the National-Socialist era (1933–1945), when it was unusual for woman to gain such public appreciation. The Nazi ideology assigned – at least in theory – specific roles to men and women. German women were to stay at home, deliver as many children as possible, be caring mothers of the future generations and ideally did not work or attend university. They had their own organization in which they should and could support the nationalistic idea and the nation of the master race. They were to be soldiers on the home front (Sauer-Burghard 2008).

So far, no thorough research has been done on Cranz's life. Some authors that briefly mention her accuse her of having been a Nazi and a member of the NSDAP. It is also known that she received many honours from the Nazis and there are photos of her shown together with the German Reichskanzler, Hitler. However, looking more closely at the rare sources, not much is known about Cranz's political engagement or opinions. Cranz herself left behind a published and an unpublished autobiography in which she mainly focused on her career as a skier. She completely omitted the political circumstances of her active time. She never mentioned that she was banned from teaching in schools for her collaboration with the Nazis, and that she was sentenced to farm work in France after the war (e.g. Allen 2012). These blanks in her autobiography raise such questions as to what extent was she a showpiece athlete and used for Nazi propaganda. Did she – like other public figures of her time (e.g. Leni Riefenstahl or Carl Diem) – use her fame for her own professional or – in this case – athletic goals?

This paper is a first attempt to shed light on the biography of this extraordinary skier of her time, and also to uncover her role as an athlete during the Nazi period. To what extent did Cranz fit the picture of the Nazis' ideal of women – if there was such an ideal at all – will be elaborated upon. Cranz, for instance, did not lead the life of a subordinate housewife living only for her family. On the contrary, it seems like she led a quite independent and emancipated life in which she pushed gender boundaries. Many of her characteristics could be described as male attributes, as will be shown in this paper.

Sources

So far, except for a few passages in books and newspaper articles mostly based on interviews with her, no one has written a lengthy paper on Christl Cranz. It seems that nobody dared to dig into the 'ambivalent' life of someone whose name still is known, who had been a public figure and was quite popular until her death. Even on the eve of her 100th birthday, she seems to have been given little or no attention by historians. Looking at the successful female athletes of the German team at the Olympic Games 1936, this is not only the case for

Christl Cranz. None of the female gold medallists from Germany (i.e. the javelin thrower Tilly Fleischer or the discus thrower Gisela Mauermaier) have been a major focus in sport historical works, which is not the case for successful male athletes of the 1930s. Here, biographical works on the boxer Max Schmeling or the middle-distance runner Rudolf Harbig can be found. From a gender perspective, this can be seen as discrimination within academia.

The main sources available to reconstruct the biography of Christl Cranz are her estate papers that can be found in the ski museum at Hinterzarten, in the Black Forest. Besides newspaper articles, photos and private film roles, they include the undated autobiographical manuscript, *Ein Leben für den Skilauf*. Judging by its contents, it must have been written at the end of the 1970s or beginning of the 1980s and is based on Cranz's autobiography, *Christl erzählt* (1949). The first part of the manuscript is almost identical to that of the book. Both are written very naïvely and the contents have to be carefully considered; they are very personal and reflect the author's subjective memory. In many cases, it is impossible to prove the facts. In these autobiographies, Cranz reconstructs her life as an athlete and confines herself more or less to ski-related aspects plus some personal stories about her family and friends. Almost nothing about the political circumstances of the Nazi regime, her own political opinion or her feelings and fears, her inner life during the difficult times of the national-socialistic period and the devastating war or post-war years are mentioned. This tabooing of the Nazi past was quite frequent in the post-war decades in Germany.

Since Cranz held many leadership positions in various national and international ski organizations, it would have been worthwhile to look through the minutes of the DSV and the national-socialistic umbrella organization of sports, the *Deutsche Reichsbund für Leibeserziehung* (DRL) and in it, the *Fachamt Skilauf*, the skiing section. However, for unknown reasons, these papers have been lost.³ No research can be done here. The other source found is the court files that deal with the denazification process. This process was initiated by the Allies after the war. It looked at remnants of the National-Socialist ideology in individuals. Persons who had positions of power and influence and those who had been Nazi Party members were to be removed from public office and influential positions. Depending on what they had done during the Nazi period, some even had to go to court and later to prison. Others only had to pay a penalty.

The so-called 'Spruchkammer Akte' of Christl Cranz includes material of the years 1947 to 1949, which give a few more details on Cranz's official involvement with national-socialistic organizations.⁴ The archives of the University of Freiburg, where Cranz worked in the Physical Education department from 1936 until the end of the war, also contain some documents in which she is mentioned.

Some details on Cranz's life, especially after her Olympic victory, can be found in newspapers.

The Nazis' image of the ideal German woman

The body was central to the National-Socialist ideology. The NS body politics ('Körperpolitik') aimed at creating a body of the people ('Volkskörper') which would result in a new and pure race, the Aryan race. A certain image of the ideal body and means of acquiring it through 'selection, forming, mobilization and control' were proposed. Not only was the body to be transformed, but individually educated as well. '(...) not only should the physical body

be changed but also the perception, sense of the body, the self and collective image should be changed' in regard to national-socialist ideology (Diehl 2006). There were many groups that were to be fitted to the ideal image of the Nazis. Women were one of them.

To find out whether Christl Cranz led a life according to the Nazis' image of the ideal German woman or whether she pushed gender roles is not as simple as it seems. Certainly, there was an ideal of women which more or less went back to the *Kaiserreich* and supported the polarity theory of the sexes publically propagated by the Nazis. It reflected the opposite of the independent, androgenous and emancipated woman, not just bound to her home and family, which emerged during the Weimar Republic. Still, as will be shown in the following, the Nazis' ideal also changed in the course of time and depended on the circumstances. If a woman was an important representative of Nazi power, as long as she promoted national-socialistic ideals, she did not necessarily have to be a perfect wife and mother. In this case, political goals were more important.⁵

Originally, Hitler's ideal of the world, his *Weltbild*, was very male dominated. It included the incapacitation of women. Hitler used the gender hierarchy mentioned in the Bible as an explanation for it. He also was of the opinion that women had not played a role in world history because politics, like valour, was for men only. For him 'emancipation' was invented by Jews (Schneider 2001). Both, Jews and feminists were seen as parasites (Sauer-Burghard 2008). When Hitler was not elected as chancellor in 1932, he changed his view of women – at least in public – to gain more female voters. No longer should they just be the obedient servants of men, but rather their supporting counterparts and comrades (Bendel 2007). Despite this public impression, the National Socialists had a strict gender order, according to the polarity theory, when it came to splitting the tasks of day-to-day life. Although the reality often was different, women mainly were to be mothers of as many hereditarily healthy and racially pure children as possible, while men were characterized as guardians and breadwinners of the family. Just like in the *Kaiserreich*, women were to take care of the family and household. A university education was not seen positively. Still, there were women who worked, and this was supported by the government to some extent. The ideal professions for unmarried women were nurses, social workers or teachers; in no case were they to reach the status or take on the responsibility carried by judges, soldiers or politicians (Pfister 1983; Sauer-Burghard 2008). Jutta Rüdiger, Reichsjugendführerin, said:

The woman's task is to hand over the weapons to the man, to secure the nutrition of the nation and above all to be involved in all professions which exert a great influence on the social and educational aspects of the family. This is why our young girls [Jung Mädels] and those in professional training should learn to improve themselves, so they can do their job better than any other girls in the world. (Rüdiger in Sauer-Burghard 2008, 37)

Women's loyalty to the Nazis' ideas and the German race should not only be shown through their character and attitudes, but also in their appearance. The German girls and women should be blond, have blue eyes and a strong body with wide hips and big breasts. Overall, they should make a fresh and healthy appearance and reflect the Aryan ideal. Unlike in the Weimar Republic, a clear distinction between male and female bodies and their respective was to be obvious (Pfister 1983).

Thus, women served the *Volkgemeinschaft* (national community) by adding to the Aryan race, eventually leading to more soldiers – at least this was the hope of the Nazis (Bendel 2007). Pfister talks about a 'züchterisches Ideal', meaning that the ideal German should be 'bred'. In other words, women were reduced to motherhood. Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, a leader

of national-socialist women's organizations, referred to motherhood as the 'great profession,' which was honoured (Czech, 1994).

To show its appreciation to mothers, the NSDAP not only highlighted mother's day extremely, but granted a number of awards for mothers, the so-called 'Mutterkreuz' in bronze, silver or gold, depending on how many children a woman had delivered, whether she was of pure German blood, hereditarily healthy and 'behaved' according to national-socialistic ideology.⁶ Bearers of the *Mutterkreuz* were to be greeted publically in order to show them a certain appreciation (Bendel 2007).

The equality of women can be seen in the fact that she receives that honor in those spheres of life in which she behaves according to nature (...). The German woman also has her battlefield: With each child that she gives to the nation she is fighting her battle for the nation. (Klose 1982, 177–178)⁷

Girls and women in national-socialistic organizations

The above-described polarity of the sexes secured men power, also reflected by the national-socialist government and party. The NSDAP was mostly a male organization and there were hardly any female politicians or female party members. However, this does not mean there were no female Nazis; other national-socialist organizations existed that confronted and educated girls and women with and in the Nazi ideology.

One of the most important such organizations was the *NS Frauenschaft* for adult women, founded in 1931. The other was the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (BDM) that came into existence around the same time. About 12 million girls and women were organized in one of these or other smaller organizations in which females were to be educated to become good German housewives and mothers. Through these hierarchical groups, women had their own official organizations in which certain powerful women could dominate weaker ones. In this way, certain women – just like men – could occupy leadership positions and have the power to oppress, although they were always subordinate to the male authorities (Czech, 1994; Bendel 2007).

The Nazi women's illusions can only be understood in the context of the double failure of women's emancipation to transform patriarchal institutions and to address the concerns of ordinary German women. In some aspects the Nazi women were rebels, but they did not dream of altering traditional ideas about gender role. With the parameters of institutions, they could not possibly hope to change the attempted to achieve some degree of autonomy. Instead of changing society, they created their own niche within it. This resulted not only from illusion, but from a separatist survival strategy. (Koonz 1976 in Czech 1994, 18)

From 1936 on, membership of all girls between 10 and 18 years of age was mandatory. They had various age groups.⁸ The same held for boys; they had to join the Hitler Youth (HJ). Already in 1933 – after the Nazis seized power, all other youth groups were forbidden. Especially, for sports clubs, this was difficult; quite often they could no longer maintain their offers for children and youth.

The regular BDM meetings included exercises and physical activities, handcrafts, cooking courses, etc., as well as ideological classes. While boys were to be mainly trained in the HJ in strength, endurance and toughness,⁹ girls were to develop grace through 'gymnastics'. All in all, through the BDM, girls were to become true followers of the national-socialistic ideology, healthy, disciplined girls of pure character and with excellent body control (Pfister 1983). All these aspects should mingle and thus prepare the girls for their future role as mothers.

Through a harmonic education of all physical, psychological and mental resources a female gender will be formed which can face all demands of the home and job. The girls will transfer health, grace, beauty and happiness of life from their gymnastics groups at the BDM organization 'Glaube und Schönheit' ('Faith and Beauty') into their everyday life.¹⁰

The BDM institution "Glaube und Schönheit", founded on January 19, 1938, was for young women 17–21-years old. Here, they could attend classes in homemaking and interior decoration, body hygiene, music and health care, but also physical exercises and a variety of sports. According to the Nazi ideals, these were areas which met female interests and spheres of activities (Schneider 2001).¹¹ Christl Cranz also belonged to the BDM and had the position as a leader, a *Scharführerin*, as can be read in her denazification files.

Women's sports in Nazi Germany

Sport and physical exercises played a central role in Nazi Germany. They were used to 'form' the so-called 'Herrenrasse', the master race. They gained importance in national-socialist organizations, and physical exercise took on a new standing in the school curriculum. This was also the case for women's sport, as Michaela Czech's study (1994) has shown.

Just like other areas of public life, all sport federations and sport clubs were 'levelled' (*gleichgeschaltet*) when the Nazis seized power in 1933. This means that the officers were no longer elected in a democratic way. Now the leaders were designated. Hans von Tschammer und Osten became *Reichsportführer* (a kind of sport minister) in 1934. In 1936, the centrally organized *Deutsche Reichsbund für Leibesübungen* (DRA), which changed its name in 1938 into *Nationalsozialistischer Reichsbund für Leibesübung* (NSRL), was the umbrella organization of sports in Nazi Germany. It was divided into 14 different sports sections (*Fachämter*) (Pfister 1983). Sports also took up the *Arierparagraph*, which meant that Jews were no longer allowed to be members in German sports clubs according to the by-laws of all DRA (Krüger 1993).

As already mentioned, exercises and sport were central to the national-socialistic girls' and women's organizations. Sport became a 'requested obligation' after the Nazis seized power (Czech 1994). The purpose of sport was to 'make a girl healthy and happy in body and spirit through strict physical training, so that in her later life the duty and task of motherhood would easy' (Siber von Grothe 1933 in Czech 1994).

Exercises and sport appropriate for females mirrored the norms of the Nazi picture of women and their subordinate role in society. It was warned that sport could lead to masculinization and thus to emancipation and social equality of the sexes. Social order and male superiority should not be questioned (Czech 1994). Very popular for the physical activities was a kind of rhythmic gymnastics which focused through its movements on harmony. The dancer was to be a part of a *Gruppenkörper* (the body of a larger group), which would lead to an 'organic Volksgemeinschaft', the overall goal. Although graceful and feminine forms of exercise like dance and certain forms of health exercise were acceptable, gymnastics, hiking, track and field and swimming were also considered appropriate. There were also examples where girls and women participated in handball, rowing, fencing and skiing. One can say that except for football, many forms of exercise were possible (Czech 1994; Pfister 1983; Sauer-Burghard 2008).¹²

However, high-performance sports and the striving for records were regarded controversially. On the one hand, they fostered one-sidedness and on the other, individualism

and internationalism. A further argument raised the question of whether high-performance sport was at all compatible with female nature and the tasks women normally performed (Pfister 1983; Czech 1994). So, how do athletes like Christl Cranz fit into this image of the ideal women as envisioned by the NSDAP?

That high-performance sport for women was nevertheless promoted had to do with the 1936 Olympic Games. At these games, every medal was of importance for the German government. The Nazis wanted to show the world the power and success of their regime. As a result, they supported women's sports. They had the most successful female team; German women won 13 out of 45 possible medals in the competitions for women. These athletes – one of them was Christl Cranz – were used for Nazi propaganda. Political goals had the highest priority, meaning that this was more important than the propagated *Frauenbild* (Pfister 1983).

Skiing during the 1930s

Writing about Christl Cranz means writing about skiing and ski history. Before relating to her as a person, a very short insight into the development of skiing in Germany after the First World War until the 1930s is in order.

The year 1891 is seen as the beginning of skiing in Germany. It was the year when the first ski club was founded in Todnau, in the Black Forest. From the very beginning, women participated in this pastime. Over the decades, skiing developed into a very popular sport for men and women in Germany and in 1905 the umbrella body, the German Ski Federation, *Deutscher Skiverband* (DSV), was founded (Hofmann and Martinelli, 2016).

During the First World War, skiing was of military significance. Many of the soldiers who returned home after the lost war had learned how to ski. Some of them became ski instructors and also were familiar with the making of skis. Due to these new 'specialists' and also because of new technologies such as lifts, skiing could spread to the general population (Peiffer 2001).

Skiing was connected to valour, as can be read in the first statutes of the DSV. Children and youth should get a pre-military education through skiing. This can be considered a result of the Treaty of Versailles that forbade Germans to have a military education. The army was reduced to 100,000 soldiers. Thus, the Germans found other ways to still have some military training: sport was one, and this included skiing. For the ski federation, it was not a problem to continue its politics when the Nazis came into power in 1933. It integrated itself seamlessly into the new structures of the Third Reich and was one of the first sports federations to implement the *Arierparagraph*. Skiing was still a growing sport; when in 1935, it became the *Fachamt Skilauf* under the DRA, which continued to pursue the sport-political goals of the *Kaiserzeit* and Weimar Republic. Thus, young skiers grew right into NS society with its ideology (Falkner 2004, 2005).

During the NS period, at least before the war, skiing became a mass movement, meaning it was a very popular leisure time activity for all social classes, men and women. One example is the ski trips organized by the NS fellowship, *Kraft durch Freude* (Kdf), which made it possible for German workers and their families to travel to various mountainous areas in Germany. Alone in the winter of 1935/36, 80,000 persons participated in these ski classes offered at ski resorts all over Germany (Falkner 2004; Peiffer 2001). These were not

persons that belonged to the German Ski Federation which had over 1300 clubs under its umbrella with about 124,000 members (Statistisches Jahrbuch [1932] 1933).

The growing popularity of skiing was also mirrored in the success of German ski racers on an international level. In competitive skiing, there were also new developments. Before the 1930s, there were only cross-country and jumping competitions. In 1931, the International Ski Federation (FIS) organized the first world championships in alpine skiing for both men and women; on the Olympic floor, the 1936 Games were the starting point of this discipline in the form of a combination of a slalom competition and downhill races.

Biographical notes on Christl Cranz

It was during this period of the increasing popularity of skiing among the broader population in Germany – in the 1930s – that Christl Cranz grew up. Christl Franziska Antonia Cranz-Borchers was born on July 1, 1914, in Brussels and died at the age of 90 on September 28, 2004. In 1918, in the last year of the First World War, the family fled from Belgium and first settled in a hilly region about 50 km south of Stuttgart, on the Swabian Alb. Here, she was given her first skis. From there, the family moved for a few years to the world-famous ski resort of Grindelwald, Switzerland, where she and her brother, Heinz-Rudolf (Rudi)¹³, learned to ski. They had a very close relationship. He became an important companion during her competitive years until his death during the Second World War.

During the world economic crisis in 1928, Christl's mother settled with the three children in Freiburg in the Black Forest, in the southern part of Germany. Christl and her brother Rudi joined the Ski Club Freiburg, started ski racing and eventually became nationally and internationally well-known skiers.

In her book *Christl erzähl!* she tells that she always supported in her career as a skier to get time off from her school, university or work to train or compete. It is not known whether Cranz's talent was noticed by the leading sport politicians in her early years as a ski racer (who gave orders so she could train) or whether she was simply lucky to have a lot of supporters. Certainly, it was uncommon in the 1930s for a woman or young girl to be as active in a sport as she was. During her school time, Christl's school grades were too good for her teachers and her principal to argue against giving her some time off from school for training. Still she recalls that it was always somewhat embarrassing for her mother to request a few days' leave from school. Sometimes, Christl's coach went to ask instead (Cranz-Borchers 1949).

In 1933, Christl graduated from secondary school (Gymnasium) with her certification (*Abitur*) that allowed her to study for an academic degree. A year later, she took up her one-year study programme in Berlin at the *Deutsche Hochschule für Leibesübungen* to become a p.e. teacher for secondary schools. After graduating, she found a position in the Physical Education Department of the University of Freiburg, her hometown, from 1936–1945.¹⁴ This was also her most successful competitive time. Cranz won many national and international ski races in the years 1934–1939. She also had certain privileges at the university and later at work. For example, in 1936, she was given a three-month leave for the preparation for the Winter Olympics in Garmisch-Patenkirchen (Cranz-Borchers 1949). Also, after these Olympics, Cranz had a special status at the p.e. department of the University of Freiburg, ordered by Hitler and the *Reichssportminister* von Tschammer und Osten. Cranz was paid a monthly salary, but was excused for training sessions and competitions. It was unclear

whether she could be legally employed at the university as a gymnastics instructor or given a different title in order not to lose her Olympic amateur status. The name of her position had to meet the approval of the authorities in Berlin (Universität Freiburg protocols).

Cranz's victory at the 1936 Winter Olympics

The 1936 Winter and Summer Games are known as the Nazi Olympics; these were the first Olympics that became a stage for a regime and were politically exploited. The Winter Olympics 1936 were held from February 6 to 16 in the southern German ski resort of Garmisch-Patenkirchen. The two cities were merged into one in 1935 due to the organization of the Olympics. Among the 646 participating athletes were 80 women. The Games were declared open in a blinding snowstorm by Reichskanzler Adolf Hitler. New competitions were taken up, among them alpine skiing, which consisted of a combined slalom and downhill race (Organisationskomitee 1936; Renson 2004). On February 8, 1936, Christl Cranz became the first Olympic female alpine skiing gold medallist ever. She herself wrote in her autobiography: 'My biggest success and my biggest experience in racing were the Olympic Games' (1949). The next day she had the honour to be the forerunner in the men's slalom (Organisationskomitee 1936).

The race itself was quite dramatic. In those days, the slopes were less prepared than today. The ski equipment featured wooden skis without security bindings, but already with edges and leather boots with shoe laces. It was not uncommon for someone to fall during a race, but then the skier would get up and continue on. '(...) through extreme commitment and strongest concentration I was able to win (...) ' were her words (Cranz-Borchers 1949).

On February 7, Christl started with number 11 on a very cold, but sunny winter day, for the downhill part of the competition.

Finally I was at the start, finally I could ski. It started well: the first three turns after the start of the women's were a great pleasure, then the schuss, around an N-tree and into the labyrinth where huge moguls forced you to ski exactly. All the difficulties were like child's play. But then I got close to the steep slope. Reduce speed and then down. With slightly transverse skis I was skiing over the run, turned to go schuss again towards the little bridge – but, oh, what a shock – , there was someone lying exactly at the narrowest part, in the middle of the bridge. It was number 10, the English skier Evelyn Pinching. This means I already had gained one minutes! But now – ? The bridge was narrow, the schuss fast. Would I be able to pass? So what, it will work! Skis close together and whizz past. (Cranz-Borchers 1949, 75)

Then, she tells about the spectators who were enthusiastic and screaming. When she thought the most difficult part would be over, she fell. There was ice in front of a gate; she flipped backwards and landed face down in the snow, her skis locked in a little pine tree. It took her a while to get out, and she fell again trying to do so. In the meantime, Pinching passed her. Finally, she got up; she continues: 'The last steep run! Finish! But people are quiet. I know why. I hardly dared to look up to hear my time.' The Norwegian Laila Schou Nilsen won this downhill race; Cranz placed sixth, 19 s after the winner. However, there was still a chance for her to win if she would ski a very good slalom the next day. She not only skied well, she also was lucky, because Schou Nilsen had problems on the race course. Cranz recounts that she gave all she could and even almost fell at the first gate (Cranz-Borchers 1949). This commitment awarded her with the gold medal after the second slalom race. Total commitment was a general motto for her: 'There is nothing in between for me. It's all or nothing! (Cranz-Borchers 1949).

The media representation of Christl Cranz

This victory changed Cranz's life completely; she had become a sport heroine. Now, she was being invited to parties by Nazi politicians. She was the German champion who perfectly fit into the Nazi ideology: Never give up, fight for your goals until the end, even when you are behind and seem to have no chance. A newspaper clipping by an unknown author, found in her estate papers 'Wie Christl Cranz Siegerin wurde' ('How Christl Became a Winner'), reflects this. This article must have been published a day after Cranz won Olympic gold and highlights her achievements and struggle to win:

One cannot calculate a victory. What makes it decisive in a competition of outstanding talents is the use of one's remaining mental energy, the extent of which cannot be calculated. Heroic – and whether one is a hero or not becomes evident at the moment of truth.

The author wrote about her two slalom races, in which she had already finished the first course very well, 4 s ahead of everyone else. The gold medal was secure. But she gave even more in the second course, attacked again:

What is this 'all'? One could hardly explain it. But in these moments the masses felt the drama of the heroic battles. And in such a battle it is always the 'all' that is at stake.

We can feel it again: it is not just an extraordinary performance. It was the Christl who strove to be a hero and lost yesterday, and now she won. And we all won with her; we, who trembled for her victory.

Due to Cranz's many victories, she was invited to the big events organized by influential Nazis in Berlin (Falkner 2005). Sport historian Hajo Bernett writes that Cranz, together with other athletes, also supported the elections of the NSDAP in 1936 a month after the Olympics in Garmisch (1983).

One of her most important public appearances involving politics was in 1941/42 when there was a call for 'skis for the east front'. The war had been going on for some time and the German soldiers were not prepared for the hard winter in Russia. via radio and newspapers, people were asked to contribute their skis. *Reichssportführer* (sport minister) von Tschammer und Osten made a public call in which he especially spoke to the people at home and the athletes for whom the soldiers were defending with their lives:

With a special intensity I want to talk to you today, my skiers. You have those materials which our soldiers need urgently. All of you had to save to buy ski equipment. There is no one who loves this sport more than you do. This is why for some of you in this very moment it might be difficult to give away the equipment and not be able to perform your sport for a while. But comrades, what is this in comparison to the sacrifice which our soldiers have to make? In their ranks are our comrades. Who wouldn't want to do without his very best equipment this winter, knowing that it will be so much easier for our soldiers? The soldiers at the front are risking their lives. Armed with weapons, they are defending your happiness and peace at home. The Führer has called. The call will be answered with great joy. German sport gives everything that it possesses for it. (Peiffer, 57)

Later, there was even a law that everyone who owned skis had to hand them over to the government. Christl Cranz, as it was reported on the radio, in newspapers and in the *Wochenschau*, gave her skis away. In the *Reichssportblatt* of January 6, 1942, she was cited on the front page: 'We should be ashamed of having skis and not giving them to the soldiers at the front who called for them!' However, Cranz did not receive the attention expected. An SS report stated that everyone knows that a skier certainly has more than this one pair of skis (Falkner 2005). Thus, her contribution was even seen critically by parts of the public

and not as such a great effort. Unfortunately, nothing is known about her reaction on to this criticism. However, in the files of the University of Freiburg, Cranz's employer, a note can be found – dated one week later – with the order that she should keep some of her skis to be able to teach skiing to students and would even be allowed to carry them in public ([Universität Freiburg](#) Generalia).

At this time, Christl's beloved brother, Rudi, was already dead. He belonged to the mountain artillery and died, at the age of 22, in June of 1941, when the Germans attacked the Soviets in Poland. The German ski historian Falkner (2005) supposes that Christl Cranz stopped competitive skiing because of his death. However, according to her manuscript, there were simply no more international competitions of significance to participate in. For the press, she handed in some of her skis, but could still keep some for teaching. This seems to be contradicted by the government. Students still were educated in skiing, while others had to hand in their skies for the soldiers.¹⁵

Denazification of Christl Cranz

Not much is known about Cranz's years between 1942 and 1947, the last years of the war and the post-war years. How did Christl experience the war? Was she safe because she was living far from the huge metropolises? Did she still work at the Physical Education Department of the University of Freiburg? Where there any students left to teach? What happened to her right after the war?

According to a letter in the *Spruchkammer*, she must have worked between 1935 and 1945 at the department. A history of this institution even mentions that Cranz was its provisional head during the last year of the war when the director had to join the army (Bach 2003; [Universität Freiburg](#) Generalis).

Freiburg was occupied by the French after the war. There are various sources that briefly mention that Cranz, now Cranz-Borchers (she had married Adolf Borchers, fighter pilot and bearer of the Knights' Cross) in 1943, was sentenced to work in a camp in France. However, there is no precise information about the length of her stay; it varies between 8 and 11 months. This punishment was based on the assumption that Cranz had been a spy for the NSDAP (Prieser, 1995; Homepage Gemeinde Oberstaufen, Allen 2012). But on what facts was this supposition based? Nor do Cranz's autobiographical publications shed more light on this period. These months in France remain a blank in her autobiography, as do the last years of the war.

What can be found are various files that deal with Cranz's denazification. In many of the official documents, it can be read that she was neither an active National-Socialist nor a member of the NSDAP. However, as mentioned before, women had their own organizations to participate in. Christl Cranz was accused of having been a member of the BDM since 1933; her leadership position (*Scharführerin*) – also beginning in 1933 – in the Jung Mädels, a sub-section of the BDM, was noted as well as her membership in the DRA since 1938 and her office as supervisor of the women's ski division (*Frauenfachwartin*) of this umbrella organization since 1939 (9.12.1947, Sonthofen, Arbeitsblatt). The files of different *Spruchkammern* from the years 1947–1949 reveal that she had to pay various penalties as a 'follower' of the Nazis.

When Cranz's denazification was made public in 1948 on the front page of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Edmund Goldschag¹⁶, one of the founders and editor of this newspaper, accused

the city of Sonthofen, where the *Spruchkammer* was located, of acting in favour of Cranz because they wanted to have this world champion as a ski instructor in their region (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* March 31, 1948). A letter sent a week earlier by Goldschaag to this court tells that he lived close to Christl Cranz in Freiburg and that he knew for sure ‘(...) that she never was only a follower (*Mitläufer*), but a fanatic *Naziweib* [Nazi woman] until the last day of the war, her fanatic demeanor was a danger to the whole area.’

His letter was given to the plaintiff, who demanded that Goldschaag correct his statement publicly; otherwise, there would be legal charges. A month later, on May 19, another letter was written to Mr Goldschagg stating that so far, none of the investigations into Cranz’s past as a National-Socialist showed any results. The court concluded that she was “neither an activist nor an informer, nor a party member at all and that in all those years no one had noticed her membership in the BdM”. However, if Mr Goldschagg should have any proof whatsoever, it would be welcome. In this answer, the court in Sonthofen was referring to a communication from the Department of Sport of the University of Freiburg from January of 1948. It had a similar content: “While working with us Frau Borchers devoted her whole character only to sports. She never propagandized for the N.S. and was, as far as I could see, very open in her opinions, maintaining a critical attitude against all N.S. institutions”.¹⁷

Whether Goldschaag was right or not is not known. What might be a further sign of Christl Cranz’s support of the Nazis is a questionnaire, which was used by the NSDAP in 1941 to make a political evaluation of civil servants (*Beamte*) and confidentially sent to the NSDAP *Gauleitung* (District) Baden in Karlsruhe. In their answers, the officials of the *Gauleitung* gave a very positive impression of Cranz regarding her national-socialistic attitude. They wrote that she never talked negatively about the Nazi Regime, supported it, and that she was against Jews – an attitude quite important to Nazi ideology. It was also mentioned that due to her busy schedule, she was unable to attend educational and community evenings. Her *charakterliche Wertung* (evaluation of character) depicted her as devoid of weaknesses, and described her as ‘always prepared for sacrifice and commitment’. The summary reads: ‘As a person known worldwide and holder of many skiing records, one can have no doubt about her personality. It can be said that she is a supporter of National-Socialism’¹⁸. They also made some notes on her physical appearance: tall, slender and sinewy.

Here as well, a conclusion cannot be reached as to whether Cranz can be considered a Nazi or whether she, like many other Germans, belonged to certain organizations, but was uncritical of the regime, wishing only to be left alone and avoid problems in her daily life.

A new life after the war

Cranz had moved to the southern German mountain village, Steibis, after the war; this became her home until she died in 2004. Her husband, Adolf Borchers, who originally was from Lüneburg in the northern part of Germany, joined her after he returned from captivity as a prisoner of war in Russia. The couple had three children: Bärberl, in 1953; Jörg, in 1954; and Christel, in 1956.

Especially, in her unpublished autobiographical accounts, she gives insight into this new life. A life still dedicated to skiing with all its facets besides raising a family. Here again, several unanswered questions remain. Why did she choose to leave the Black Forest behind, her home and friends? Was it because the French occupied this region and she did not like to be reminded of her work in a French camp? Did she have too many painful memories

she wanted to forget? Or did she just have a good offer to move to Steibis and start a ski school among other things?

It seems that when Cranz moved to the small ski resort of Steibis-Imberg, the local population not only welcomed the newcomer who did a lot for the growing tourism of the area, but also trusted her. The Olympic gold medallist started to teach skiing in the winter of 1947/48. However, soon she was forbidden to continue. Her qualification as a p.e. teacher and the fact that she had taught skiing to students at the University of Freiburg did not help. She needed a ski instructor's certification. In the spring of 1949, she attended a course in order to get the necessary papers. There were 81 men and 3 women. Although she passed the course successfully, she was not given the certification. The ski federation was referring to a law from 1936 that said that women could not become ski instructors. Cranz writes in her autobiography how outraged she was and that she told the supervisors that they were now living in a democracy and that there were female ski instructors in other countries – which she then had to prove. The Swiss Elsa Roth, the first Chairwoman of the *Schweizerische Damenskiclub* and FIS General Secretary, was a friend from her competitive times. She could give Christl a long list with names of certified female ski instructors. From then on, there was no more discussion concerning this topic within the German ski federation, according to Cranz. Soon after, she herself was a member of the examinations committee for *Staatlich geprüfte Skilehrer* (state-certified ski teachers) (Cranz-Borchers, no year).

Together with the former ski racer Erwin Egle, Cranz opened a ski school in Steibis that is still called the *Christl Cranz-Borchers Ski Schule*. Her ski school was one of the first in Germany that had a special programme for teaching children to ski.

After the war, the sports clubs and sports federation were dissolved and in some areas (especially in the French-occupied zones) forbidden to exist. Setting up competitions was not easy. It took some years to restart the German system of club sports. In the first years thereafter, the Allies forbade the founding of clubs or federations. Step by step they were re-established, in some occupation zones sooner than in others. In 1947, the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Deutschen Skiverbände* (Working Group of German Ski Federations) was established in Stuttgart, and in 1949, when the prohibition was lifted, the national umbrella body, the DSV, was re-founded. It was during this time that the Ski Club Steibis was established. Christl Franz was a founding member in 1948, and served 29 years as its chair, but was named honorary president (Cranz-Borchers, no year).

In the re-founded ski federation, too, Cranz was quite active and had many functionary positions. Already in 1948, she was the representative for women's issues, and until 1957, the chair of the women's and girls' committee. One could draw a parallel here with her position as 'Frauenfachwartin' in the DRA *Fachamt Skilauf*. It seems like this was a continuation of that position, although records substantiating this no longer exist.

In 1951, Christl Cranz-Borchers was appointed to the Women's Committee of the FIS and also became a judge at international races, like at the 1956 Olympic Games in Cortina d'Ampezzo, and in 1960 at Squaw Valley, in the 1961 World Championships in Chamonix and in the Olympic Games in Innsbruck in 1964. In 1956, Cranz also was in charge of the German women's ski team (Cranz-Borchers, no year).¹⁹ In 1955, Christl was a member of the German delegation of the second international ski instructor congress in Val d'Isère, France.

After the 1964 Games, Cranz ended her career as a judge. According to her autobiographical manuscript, her life had become too busy: a family, the children's sports hostel, all her other jobs and always being on the road. At the elementary school in Steibis, she taught

physical education and opened a ‘*Skiheim*’, a ski hostel, for children. It was quite successful, so some children stayed there all year round and went to school in Steibis. Cranz was not able to teach in graduate schools anymore due to her political background during the Nazi time.

Athlete, Nazi or role model? Final thoughts

Until her death, Christl Cranz’s life was very much dedicated to skiing in various ways. She was one of the most victorious athletes of her time; no other female skier has won more world championships. She also was very successful and engaged in other areas centred around her favourite sport. She was the representative of women in the ski federation before, during and after the war; she was the first woman to hold a ski instructor’s licence in Germany; she held various offices in ski clubs, national and international ski federations; she served as an international judge for ski competitions; and she wrote several books on skiing. There is probably more that could be added.

However, the life of Christl Cranz-Borchers during the Nazi period was not unambiguous. On the one hand, she was a successful athlete who was used by the Nazis to promote the success of their system internationally. But Cranz also needed the support of the Nazis to achieve her own goals such as gaining permission to train, to participate in races and to study physical education in Berlin – all at a time when the official role of women was to stay home and take care of the household and the children. And she knew this. Sport historian Michaela Czech interviewed her and other successful female athletes of the Nazi period. Cranz was quoted in the study saying ‘I only can say this for myself, it was a very nice time because sport was supported and its representatives “indulged” (*verhättschelt*)’ (1994). Reading this quote seems like she enjoyed her special position within the German society during that time. All in all, Cranz’s life can be compared to some extent with that of film producer Leni Riefenstahl, another successful woman and public figure who became famous during the Nazi period. After the war, Riefenstahl was accused of having collaborated with the Nazis. Her denazification process lasted several years. Both, Riefenstahl and of high were protégées of Nazi officials, because they presented a strong and powerful Germany internationally and were also considered national heroines due to their success, a success which would not have been possible without governmental support.

Due to the lack of sources and Cranz’s own written references, one can only guess at the extent of her political involvement. It seems that after the death of her brother in 1942, she avoided public appearances. But her early engagement in the BDM and her support of the NSDAP during the elections in 1936 show that she not only went with the mainstream, but beyond it. But how far did she go? We don’t know.

Cranz’s life also reflects the life of an independent, emancipated and ambitious woman who pursued her goals. Throughout her career as a ski racer, Christl spent a lot of time among boys and men, travelling and training and not just once being better than they. Judging from the accounts in her autobiographical reports, it does not seem that Christl felt discriminated against as a woman. One gains the impression that she lived the life that she chose, and she made her own decisions. Neither her mother nor her husband seems to have influenced her, if one can believe her autobiographies. After the war, Cranz showed her power and energy in a number of leadership positions in the DSV for women’s issues or as

a judge at international ski races, and she was the (co-)founder of a number of institutions and organizations.

Still, the initial question was: How did this emancipated woman, Christl Cranz, reflect the Nazi's image of the ideal woman? Cranz was an ambitious woman. She showed total loyalty to her state, pursued her goals with all her power, never gave up and fought to the very end for her (athletic) goals and was very disciplined. These are characteristics that the Nazis appreciated, especially in males. Due to Cranz's success as a skier on an international level, she was of great importance for the Nazis. Despite her rather independent life, she was an international representative of a strong and loyal German woman. Later on in her life, she became the mother of three children, after the breakdown of the Nazi regime, but she still would have embodied their ideal of the German woman, even though Cranz was not someone who stayed at home as a family caretaker.

Looking at Cranz's autobiographies, neither emotions nor regrets about her life are expressed. She either suppressed most of them or had to live with them. She evokes the war and the Nazi period in *Christl erzähl!* in only one sentence relating to this period that changed the whole world: "The great war confounded the world and also each and every one of us" (98).

The journalist Prieser cites Cranz in the *Welt am Sonntag* with regard to her imprisonment in France and the accusation of her having been a spy: "'They really were mistaken. When I lie, everyone notices it immediately (...)'". She doesn't like to think back to this time. He quotes her again: "'I always think ahead. Living in the past is boring. It's all already happened'". It seems this was Cranz's motto to live by, a form of suppression of all the negative experiences during the war years and Nazi period. But she was not the only one. This kind of denial was not uncommon for the war generation, not only to forget, but also to protect the public image of oneself. This can also be seen in a number of historical works on sport clubs or other organizations that do not reflect on the national-socialist era in Germany. Only in the last decade with the death of the war generation, this taboo seems to slowly break away.

Notes

1. Her name was originally spelled Christel. However, due to the many autographs she had to give, she deleted the 'e'.
2. Her published books are Christl Cranz (1935). *Skilauf für die Frau*; Christl Cranz & Rudi Cranz (1939). *Erprobtes und Erfahrenes Skiläufer und ihr Gerät*, München: Verlag V. Bruckmann; Christl Cranz-Borchers (1949). *Christl erzähl!*, München: Rudlof-Rohr; Christl Cranz-Borchers (1958). *Wir laufen Ski*, Gütersloh. Bertelsmann Lesering.
3. Not only those files but also the papers of regional ski federations can no longer be located. The question is whether they were lost during the war or purposely destroyed or hidden. Also, see Falkner (2004) on this matter.
4. These files were located in Sonthofen and Kempten in the mountain region Allgäu, where Cranz moved to in 1947. Today, they are in the court archive of the city of Augsburg.
5. This can be supported by Sauer-Burghard (2008), who writes about the various ideals of women in the Nazi ideology.
6. Until 1945, about 5 million women were awarded with the 'Mutterkreuz'. For four to five children, they received the bronze Mutterkreuz; for six to seven children, silver and for more children, gold.
7. Hitler already mentioned in *Mein Kampf* that „marriage cannot be an end in itself, it has to serve a greater goal such as the sustainment of a race [...]. Because of this an early marriage

is desirable; it gives young couples the strength necessary to produce healthy and resistant offspring.”

8. The *Jung Mädels* were between 10 and 14 years old, the *Mädels* between 14 and 18 years.
9. Boys should be “as fast as greyhounds, tough as leather and hard as steel from Krupp” (German original: “Flink wie Windhunde, zäh wie Leder und hart wie Kruppstahl”) was one of Hitler’s quotes.
10. Gebietsbefehl des Gebietes Köln/Aachen, K 1/42, March 1, 1942, p. 21, <http://www.jugend1918-1945.de/thema.aspx?s=5386&m=3448&v=5386>, accessed Sept 16, 2014.
11. Additionally, see www.jugend1918-1945.de/thema.aspx?s=5386&m=3448&v=5386, accessed Sept 16, 2014, <https://www.dhm.de/lemo/kapitel/ns-regime/ns-organisationen/glaube-und-schoenheit.html>, accessed March 2, 2016.
12. Sauer-Burghard (2008) writes about sport and physical exercises in the BDM, Pfister (1983) also gives insight into – beside other aspects – the physical education curriculum and Czech (1994) provides an overall summary in her study on women’s sport during the Nazi period in Germany.
13. Heinz-Rudolf Cranz (1988–1941) was also a successful German skier. In the years between 1937 and 1941, he won several German championships in slalom and the alpine combination. At the 1936 Olympics, he placed sixth in the alpine combination.
14. In the court files, there are also some documents that mention that Cranz worked – due to a lack of educators – between October 1939 and January 1940 for the P.E. Department of the University of Munich. The University of Freiburg had to continue to pay her salary. It seems that Cranz also taught ski classes to the students from Munich (Spruchkammer Akte).
15. According to Peiffer, later on, there was a ‘Skisportverbot’, meaning that skiing was forbidden. However, Falkner is of a different opinion (2001).
16. Edmund Goldschaad (1886–1971) was a German journalist and publisher. During the Weimar Republic, he worked for the social democratic press; this led to an occupational ban during the Nazi period. He and his family hid the Jew Else Rosenfeld during the war. After the Second World War, he founded the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* together with Franz Josef Schöningh and August Schwingenstein. From the beginning on October 6, 1945 until 1951, he was the editor in chief. He remained one of the editors until his death (Wikipedia).
17. The letter was written on January 23, 1948; the signature cannot be identified.
18. The first questionnaire was sent out in July 1941.
19. Her visit to Squaw Valley in the US was quite special to her. She talks about the German skier Willi Bogner (born in 1942), who fell in the slalom competition, and about filming him. Bogner later became a famous ski-film producer and the producer of a fashion line.

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