The Burden of Women: Recognising the impact of sexual violence in World War Two

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Discussion of World War Two in popular Western history is often framed by ideas of morality; the fight of good versus evil, of right versus wrong. In this discourse, Nazi Germany is rightly held accountable for the incomprehensible events that occurred during its endeavour for Lebensraum. However, Allied actions including the carpet bombing of German cities, ethnic cleansing in post-war Europe and the massive scale of sexual violence perpetrated against German women are often overlooked in this construction of morality in World War Two. Through discussion of these issues, where Germans are placed as victims, we are not revising history nor comparing the horror of crimes; simply, it is an understanding that these complex and morally ambiguous topics belong on the historical agenda\(^1\). The mass sexual violence perpetrated against German women that was reported in the final months of World War Two reflects a considerably darker side of the Allied success. Sexual violence was evident on both the Western and Eastern front, however, for the most part, this essay will focus on the massive scale of sexual violence perpetrated by the Soviet Red Army as it progressed through Germany towards Berlin. It is generally estimated that up to two million German women and girls were raped by Soviet troops in the last months of World War Two and during the occupation that followed\(^2\). During this time, this part of daily life was discussed by German women out of necessity and as a means to cope with their experience, with the sense of collective trauma being first adhered to. This relatively open discussion was increasingly silenced in the aftermath, particularly following the return of German men and the attempt to rebuild the German nation. In this essay, it will be argued that the extensive silence of German women about these wartime experiences reflected the challenge that widespread sexual violence presented to the existing gender roles prevalent in German society. Naturally, this will begin with a discussion of the extent and nature of sexual violence that was perpetrated in Germany by the Soviet troops, and the immediate impact on German women will be considered.

Primary sources from this period often shy away from the topic of rape, and as such, the number of sources is very low compared to the extremely high incidence of sexual violence. One notable

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source from this time is an anonymous memoir, *A Woman in Berlin*, based on the diary of a 34 year old female living in Berlin during the Battle for Berlin and the Soviet occupation that followed. The memoir provides a firsthand account of the extent of the sexual violence, as well as its impact on an individual. The source is particularly useful as the author was a journalist, and as such her account effectively transcribes her environment, her emotions and the experiences of women she is in contact with. To provide a wider scope than the experience of women in Berlin, *The Tragedy of Silesia* provides a collection of firsthand accounts of sexual violence perpetrated in the eastern region of Silesia. In considering the impact of existing gender roles on the experience of German women, the construction of gender in the overwhelmingly patriarchal Nazi Germany society and in the period that followed needs to be examined, to obtain a perception of existing ideals and pressures on genders. Most integrally, the existing gender roles of Germany will be analysed to ascertain how these preconceptions affected the manner and methods through which German women dealt with the experience of sexual violence, and how this contributed to the culture of silence that was pervasive following this time. Ultimately, a brief consideration of the long-term psychological and emotional consequences for the victims of sexual violence will assist in understanding the detrimental impact of German society’s expectation of silence.

In the final months of World War Two, as Nazi Germany was under siege from both directions by the Allied forces, an estimated two million German women experienced rape, with the number of rapes itself being considerably higher due to many women being raped multiple times. In Berlin alone, the figure stands between 95,000 and 130,000 and it is estimated that about 10% of the women raped died of the consequences in Berlin, with the death rate considered much higher in the eastern regions of East Prussia, Pomerania, and Silesia. Nazi propaganda forewarned the German people of violence that would accompany the Soviet occupation, graphically exhibiting the invading troops as primordial, subhuman hordes that would rape, pillage and murder. This was in part to prepare the German people, and also as a construction attempting to maintain and bolster the home front. Despite the Nazi propaganda, the German people were caught unaware by

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6 Ibid.
the intensity of the terror that followed the invasion\(^8\). As the Soviet troops progressed westwards through Germany towards Berlin, it was a common occurrence to find villages in which every female over the age of twelve was raped, if not multiple times, and most often in front of German witnesses, including husbands, sons and fathers\(^9\). The homes, churches and public buildings would be looted for food, alcohol, and valuables, and the village would be left razed and set alight\(^10\). Reports from throughout the Soviet-occupied areas reflect a consensus of the sexual violence being widespread and seemingly indiscriminate amongst the female population, as one individual from Silesia observed “no one ventured to oppose the Russian soldiers, who spared neither old women of seventy and eighty years old nor of women who were pregnant or had just given birth”\(^11\). Furthermore, whilst we can more successfully estimate the number of women raped, the actual number of incidents of rape would have been dramatically higher, with reports from the Silesian region highlighting that women “were raped, not once or twice, but twenty, thirty and a hundred times”\(^12\). This is further supported in *A Woman in Berlin*, where the diarist notes a woman she knew was found hiding, and the Russian soldiers “lined up.. each took his turn. She says there were at least twenty but she doesn’t know for sure”\(^13\).

Although there was no direct incitement to the sexual violence that was perpetrated, the Soviet officers and administration did little to curb or discipline the rampant behaviour. Rape was not a directive by the Soviet Army, but its widespread existence and destructive nature warrants consideration of the notion of rape as a tool in war. The rape of up to two million women, with such a range in age and in such a public manner, signifies that this act was more than an uncontrollable sexual desire. Revenge would have been an important factor in this event, as the Russians had suffered immeasurably at the hands of the invading Germans. A conservative estimate suggests it suffered twenty million causalities, and the civilian population, in particular, suffered cruel and barbaric atrocities, including the rape of Russian women\(^14\). Thus, it was possible for Russian soldiers to cite this hardship as they committed their own crimes upon entering Germany. Further than this, the rise of nationalism and militarism, as was seen in the Soviet Red

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\(^10\) Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 72.


\(^12\) Kaps, *Tragedy of Silesia*, 136.


Army in their attempt to maintain morale in spite of immense suffering, creates an ideal environment for the institutionalism of patriarchal relations in which enemy women are at an increased risk of violence. In the context of warfare, mass rape signifies the total emasculation of the enemy, and within this frame, women are not necessarily attacked as an individual, but as a mere object signifying the collective enemy nation. Albeit unlikely known to the individual soldier, the perpetration of mass rape becomes a public and highly symbolic event, a display of masculine collective power and conquest, whereby they are provided an opportunity to destroy German national pride, manhood, and honour. Simultaneously, the experience is deeply personal for the individual female, violently destroying the woman’s integrity by denying the victim her own will to engage, or not to engage, in sexuality as she chooses. This mass rape had a devastating and destructive effect on German women and contributed towards the crisis of masculinity amongst the German men who remained or returned to the violation of German women.

The immediate impact of this sexual violence on German women ranged based on the nature of the incident for the individual. Medically, there was the widespread existence and transferral of sexually transmitted infections, physical trauma for the women, particularly those who were beaten or gang-raped, and of course the inevitable outcome of pregnancy. Psychologically, there appears to be a variety of responses and methods for coping, and this can be attributed to the gravity of the events for the individual, in combination with their existing mental state. Some were simply unable to bear the weight of the horror, with an estimated 10,000 committing suicide in Berlin alone. Others, it has been shown, saw the rape as one of the tribulations amongst a list of grave issues, including starvation, illness, and loss of homes and loved ones. In A Woman In Berlin, we see psychological trauma in the behaviour of the Königsberg refugee, who had fled westwards after being gang-raped and it is likely the experience of expulsion from the East and

17 Pötzsch, "Rearticulating the experience", 19.
20 Beevor, The Fall of Berlin, 410.
21 Heineman, "The Hour of the Woman", 365.
seeing entire villages destroyed would have contributed to the trauma\(^\text{22}\). Alternatively, we also see the behaviour of the diarist, who although clearly suffering internal conflict and self-loathing as a product of the attack, “I’m constantly repulsed by my own skin. I don’t want to touch myself, can barely look at my own body”\(^\text{23}\), she appears also to distance herself mentally from the experience to focus on survival and bettering her situation. One notable aspect is the choice of some German women, the diarist included, to find high-ranking or protective soldiers to offer themselves in exchange for protection against continued rape by an uncontrollable amount of soldiers. It is important to clarify here that this is not fraternisation, as could sometimes be considered the case in the Western part of Berlin with American and other Allied troops. Rather, they are in an environment of compulsory intercourse, wherein the female is exposed to rape regardless of her choice, and would rather agree to rape on her own terms, and from one individual, than run the risk of continuous rape from an uncontrolled range and number of soldiers\(^\text{24}\). This is an experience which was a point of contention for German women after the occupation, as they were criticised for their treachery and shameless behaviour, without reasonable recognition of the alternate experience of serious insecurity and harm that would have been delivered to them.

In understanding this criticism, we must consider the traditional ideas and pressures of masculinity and femininity that existed in German society. The construction of gender played an integral part in Nazi ideology and its ideas for a utopian Third Reich. In the overwhelmingly patriarchal society, the social and cultural understanding of the roles of men and women were clearly outlined and disseminated through Nazi propaganda, policy, and institutions. Nazi social policy sought to promote the idea of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, a national community that was based on racial purity and involved the collective struggle on behalf of the nation, and within this the roles of gender were clearly defined\(^\text{25}\). This largely involved re-shaping the development of society in reflection of a perceived traditional past, focussing on the archetypal rural family. This construction placed men as the provider and protector of society, and women firmly positioned in *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*\(^\text{26}\). These ideals were distributed under the guise of biology, with Hitler professing "the wonderful thing about nature and providence is that no conflict between the sexes


\(^{23}\) Ibid, 96.

\(^{24}\) Messerschmidt, “The Forgotten Victims of World War II”, 712.


can occur as long as each party performs the function prescribed for it by nature”\(^\text{27}\). Men were expected to be strong, dominant and willing to serve the \textit{Volkgemeinschaft} through hard work or fighting for the Fatherland. This understanding of the existing ideals of masculinity is confirmed in \textit{A Woman in Berlin}, where the diarist writes “the Nazi world - ruled by men, glorifying the strong man”\(^\text{28}\). The female equivalent of serving the \textit{Volkgemeinschaft} was seen to reside in the gendered space of the home. The Mother Cross, the female equivalent of the Iron Cross, could be gained in Nazi society if a women produced large numbers of children, and demonstrated good housekeeping skills\(^\text{29}\). The role of German women in Nazi society was instead subordinate to men, they were a symbol familial strength, sexuality and purity and were expected to be strong in character and in maintenance of the home as a means to serve their national community. The subordination of women is also referred to in the memoir, where the diarist notes “a German man always wants to be smarter, always wants to be in a position to teach his little woman”\(^\text{30}\). For such an ideological construction of femininity, as dispersed through propaganda, education, and policies that rewarded those who fit within it, it was not surprising that those who stepped outside these ideals were susceptible to criticism and mistreatment.

What is made clear by such determined gender roles, is the challenge that the widespread sexual violence would have presented to these ideals of masculinity and femininity. In the memoir, many women surrounding the diarist openly discuss their experiences of rape, and this openness can be seen as a method through which the women are able to cope with the trauma. The diarist notes “and this mass rape is something we are overcoming collectively as well... all the women help each other by speaking about it, airing their pain, and allowing others to air theirs and spit out what they’ve suffered”\(^\text{31}\). A point of conflict is the return of the author’s boyfriend, as after hearing of her experiences and the open discussion of the sexual violence, her boyfriend claims that the women have become a “bunch of shameless bitches”\(^\text{32}\). Following this, the diarist writes how she felt “cold as ice in Gerd’s arms”\(^\text{33}\), signifying the impact of trauma in her ability to engage in sexual interactions, and she believed that “for him I’ve been spoiled once and for all”\(^\text{34}\). Ultimately, Gerd leaves without warning and this example signifies the challenges of existing

\(^{27}\) Ibid, 43.
\(^{28}\) Anonymous, \textit{A Woman in Berlin}, 62.
\(^{29}\) Stibbe, “In and Beyond the Racial State”, 166.
\(^{30}\) Anonymous, \textit{A Woman in Berlin}, 143.
\(^{31}\) Anonymous, \textit{A Woman in Berlin}, 174.
\(^{32}\) Anonymous, \textit{A Woman in Berlin}, 305.
\(^{33}\) Ibid.
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
gender roles. The extent and nature of widespread rape by Soviet troops challenged ideals of masculinity in Nazi German society by reflecting the inability of the men to fulfil their perceived duty to protect women and society. and women. In contrast, the mass sexual violence challenged the ideals of femininity by destroying the perception of purity, modesty, morality and obscuring traditional ideas of sexuality and motherhood through the development of sexual diseases, inability to perform sexually from the trauma, and pregnancies of rape.

Following the return of German soldiers and prisoners of war, the process of re-masculinising German society began through a reassertion of the pre-existing notions of gender. The issue of sexual violence was suppressed as too shameful for women discuss, and the humiliation to German masculinity meant many women feared the reactions of men, with reports of estrangement and even murder. The patriarchal society of post-war Germany rejected discourse surrounding this experience as it obstructed the re-masculinisation of returning men, as well as hindered their ability to consider the women in the same way. Through coercing them to silence, they conveniently shrank away from the uncomfortable reality of the sexual violence. The silence around women's experience of the rapes thus served to reconstruct the traumatised masculinity of German men, and to protect women from criticism and mistreatment from stepping outside the idealised perception of femininity in German society. The silence regarding this event in German history is evident for many decades afterward, and this is garnered by the lack of individual accounts in the public sphere, as well as its omission in German society's recollection of this period. In the German Democratic Republic, the continuation of Soviet administration meant any criticism regarding the behaviour of the Soviet soldiers was suppressed, and victims were provided no opportunity to recount their experiences. In West Germany, whilst the plight of German citizens was not shied away from in reports and histories, such as those who lived through bombings or returning veterans, the experience of sexual violence by German women was left largely unwritten due to the discomfort it evoked. The silence regarding this event in discourse and in the public sphere reflected the expectation of silence from the individual females who experienced it. The memoirs reception upon publication encountered this discomfort, as following the release of the German edition in 1959, the book was not greeted with enthusiasm and critics

37 Pötzsch, “Rearticulating the experience”, 18-19.
claimed the diarist exhibited ‘shameless immorality’. The author had already chosen to remain anonymous, which reflects the taboo associated with discussing the sexual violence in German society, and upon these criticisms, the diarist ordered the book to not be published any further during her lifetime, which explains its relatively recent second release in 2003. This reflects how the existing constructions of gender placed pressure on women to be silent and disengage from the experience of sexual violence.

From a modern perspective, we have much greater understanding of the psychological impact of trauma, particularly if these issues are not worked through. A study of the psychological consequences of the sexual violence in Germany in World War Two showed that, even decades later, 19% of 27 interviewed women reported symptoms of full PTSD and 30% reported a partial manifestation of the disorder. Through more modern post-war settings, an understanding has been developed of the importance of acknowledgment and reconciliation for individual coping with collective war traumatization. Unlike the victims of bombing campaigns, the German women who suffered rape could not expect commemorations nor memorials as recognition of their suffering. Nor was there any meaningful structure of compensation developed, as could be found for German veterans of World War Two. The uncomfortable nature of the attacks on German women in the gendered public sphere inhibited them from receiving the same treatment as other German victims, and in doing so obstructed the ability for women to work through their memories and trauma.

An inextricable link is found between the pressures and ideals of existing gender roles in Nazi German and the post-war society and the culture of silence that developed amongst German women regarding their experience of sexual violence. The clearly outlined notions of masculinity and femininity in German society meant women felt unable to discuss their experiences for fear of shame and judgement, and this was reaffirmed by the harsh criticisms received by the anonymous diarist following the publication of her memoir. To pretend to be one of the few women who escaped rape was to be preserved as a symbol of purity, and did not create a feeling of emasculation in their partners or family members “from now on we women will have to keep our mouths shut and pretend that precisely we had been spared. Otherwise, no man will want to

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40 Ibid.
42 Pötzsch, "Rearticulating the experience", 18.
come close to us anymore”\textsuperscript{43}. The pressure from family and society to remain quiet about individual experiences, as well as the omission of the event as a collective experience for women from most accounts from the period, contributed to the culture of silence that permeated German society. The success of \textit{A Woman in Berlin} following its second publication in 2003 highlights the importance of this event in understanding a wider scope of World War Two, and the increase in memoirs and articles regarding the event since the memoir’s second release will provide a greater platform to examine the impact of the widespread sexual violence in the lives of German women.

\textbf{Bibliography}


\textsuperscript{43} Anonymous, \textit{A Woman in Berlin}, 163.


