German Rape Victims of the Red Army, 1944-1949

What caused the decades of silence from German women who had been raped by the Red Army in World War II? When and why did historians begin to focus on the mass-rape?

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The historical community’s traditional neglect to address the atrocities committed by Red Army soldiers against German women during World War II is amongst the most significant oversights in modern historiography. During combat operations and the subsequent Soviet occupation from 1944-1949, the Red Army executed a mass-rape against civilian women and children on an unprecedented scale. Estimates of the number of German women raped understandably vary, but most tend to settle at two million victims.¹ What the number does not account for are the thousands of women who were raped repeatedly or on multiple occasions. Despite these overwhelming figures, historical investigation into the issue in the decades following the defeat of Nazi Germany was almost completely non-existent. Likewise, popular public discourse in Germany and abroad either disregarded the atrocities or denied their occurrence. To attribute the relegation and expulsion of the discussion surrounding the mass-rape to individual choice would be inaccurate. Deliberate actions were taken, often state-sponsored, by the Soviets and the West to suppress the rape-narrative. This essay will aim to explore these political and societal factors that shaped the decades of silence; primarily the fixation on portraying Germany as the sole perpetrators of war crimes in the European theatre and the focus on the Soviets and the West as its heroic liberators. Some of the first endeavours to investigate Red Army brutality in the almost thirty years following the conclusion of World War II were initiated in the mid-1980s. However it was not until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 that the atrocities committed against German women transcended its traditional ‘secondary’ designation. The availability of Soviet archival information and records, albeit incomplete, have since made the topic a mainstream focus of Western historiography. Since the 1990s, the scholarship of the mass-rape has incorporated many

different focuses into its research. Historians have presented explanations for the motives behind the rapes. Some point to savage retribution for the horrors enacted by the Einsatzgruppen and the Wehrmacht against Russian civilians in the Nazi’s Operation Barbarossa, as well as a perceived ‘right’ to the German women as spoils of war. The extent of the Soviet leadership’s knowledge of the crimes being committed by their soldiers has also been contested by historians since the end of the Cold War, with many historians maintaining that it was not just tolerated during World War II, but in some cases, actively encouraged.

Hitler’s Operation Barbarossa in June 1941 unleashed a wave of civilian brutality matched perhaps only by their previous invasion of Poland. Fanatically inspired by Hitler’s anti-Judeo-Bolshevik rhetoric, the Wehrmacht swept through the Soviet Union, massacring civilians and destroying entire towns. Jews were the obvious target. In Kiev alone, 33 771 Jews were assembled after the fall of the city to the Nazis and ordered to be slaughtered. Yet the assault on the population did not solely discriminate on religious denomination. The Wehrmacht were ordered to assume anyone in ‘civilian clothes with a close-cropped head’ was a Red Army soldier and therefore must be executed. Whilst the responsibility for the systematic murder of civilians was meant to lie with specialised Schutzstaffel (SS) units- the Einsatzgruppen - behind the lines of the army, Wehrmacht soldiers often volunteered to partake in their executions. Rampant anti-Semitic and anti-communist attitudes amongst the German soldiers resulted in no room for pity or mercy. Millions of Soviets were directly or indirectly killed by the Nazis in their advance, many dying from starvation following Nazi looting and the plundering of their food and livestock. This number does not include the estimated three million Red Army soldiers estimated to have died in prisoner-of-war camps. The Red Army halted the Wehrmacht at Stalingrad in August 1942, and following one of the bloodiest battles in warfare history, had surrounded the German 6th Army by February 1943. Following the heavy losses of German men and resources, a two-year territorial march by the Red Army towards Berlin began. Red Army soldiers did not discriminate between the ordinary German and the soldiers who ravaged their country and people. Soviet retribution was ruthless, and it was against the most vulnerable- women and

children— that the worst occurred. Approximately two million German women are thought to have been raped by Red Army soldiers, grandmothers and children under twelve years old amongst them.\(^6\) The number of German women who died in connection with the rape are unknown, but historian Antony Beevor estimates that approximately 10 000 of the 100 000 Berlin victims died, and that death rates in other regions of Germany were likely much higher.\(^7\)

The Red Army executed the most substantial and violent mass-rape in history. The sheer scale of the atrocities that occurred would typically suggest that extensive historiographical enquiry and public discourse would soon eventuate. Yet the political and social environment that developed in the immediate post-war years was not of ‘typical’ nature. The opportunity to divide a powerful, defeated nation amongst a group of heterogeneous victors was unique.\(^8\) Following the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945, the Allies split Germany into four major zones of occupation. In 1949, the American, British and French zones would combine to create the capitalist Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the west. Similarly, the Soviets would create the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the east. These two states were not formed with the goal of creating immediately prosperous and autonomous nations.\(^9\) East and West Germany were both heavily regulated by their respective military governments, socially and economically. At a cost to the potential regrowth and well-being of the two states, the Allied nations suppressed the Germans in their occupied zones in favour of strictly coordinated stability.\(^10\) In East Germany, ruled by the Soviets and subject to the intense oppression that characterised Stalinist communism, this was to be expected. Yet West Germany, a republic supposedly created to develop into a liberal democracy, initially displayed many ideologically repressive similarities, albeit more humane, to its communist counterpart.\(^11\)

The primary post-war aim of the Americans was to punish Germany and completely deprive it of any autonomy. James Payne argues that modern writers are incorrect in

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\(^6\) Beevor, *Berlin*, p. 31.
asserting that the initial goal of American occupation was to democratise Germany.\textsuperscript{12} His evidence lies in their denazification strategies. The Americans carried out an extensive denazification process in 1945 that was not present in the other Western zones.\textsuperscript{13} The entire adult population in the American zone, some thirteen million Germans, were made to complete an autobiographical questionnaire detailing any involvement with the Nazis. It contained 150 personal questions and until it was reviewed by tribunal, the individual could not hold employment other than labourer.\textsuperscript{14} This ‘guilty until proven innocent’ and guilt by association approach was a far cry from the rights of citizens in a liberal democracy. Political denazification strategies also infringed on individual civil liberties. Groups of society that had suffered the most under Hitler’s regime, particularly Jews and communists, were promoted to positions of political influence that they were not necessarily qualified for. Special courts, Spruchkammers, were introduced where non-professional judges were licensed to sentence suspected former Nazis, dictating movement and employment constraints despite the absence of legitimate evidence.\textsuperscript{15} In political office, despite detaining 46 000 former Nazis, the American-appointed Bavarian president Fritz Schäffer was sacked for apparently lacking enthusiasm in their pursuit.\textsuperscript{16} America’s denazification policies were only intensified in the face of their limited success. The definition of what behaviour constituted Nazism was altered at least three times.\textsuperscript{17} By June 1945, it became mandatory to remove anyone from educational or administrative office who had joined the Nazi party or held public office after 1933.\textsuperscript{18} The British also pursued thorough denazification policies, but not to the same extent or intensity as the Americans. The British leadership were ‘horrified’ in response to one American directive to dissolve all schools, universities, courthouses and newspapers, and arrest all those employed.\textsuperscript{19} Whilst the British recognized the value of allowing ex-Nazi affiliated military and public servants to continue their roles in efficiently re-building the state’s processes, they were eclipsed by America’s ambitions. The

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Payne, “Did the United States Create Democracy in Germany?,” p. 215.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} MacDonough, After the Reich, p. 214.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 214.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} James F. Tent, Mission on the Rhine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 50.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 50.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Tom Bower, Blind Eye to Murder: Britain, America and the purging of Nazi Germany- A Pledge Betrayed (London: Granada Publishing Limited, 1983), p. 163.
\end{itemize}
French policy of denazification seldom focused on Nazi party affiliation. They were not concerned with discriminating between Nazis and ordinary Germans. To them, all Germans were responsible for the invasion of their country. 20 Thus, the French focused on forcing the perception onto their German occupants that now they were their conquerors.

Germans living in the Soviet zone, immediately subjected to the levels of suppression that accompanied an implementation of Stalinised communism, were oppressed to the greatest extent. Unlike the Western zones, the Soviet sphere was free from the influential constraints of foreign directional compromise. Similarly, Stalin’s approaches to denazification could not be challenged or diluted by members of the Soviet leadership elite. Soviet denazification was primarily focused on draining and replacing the economic structures of Nazi Germany. To replenish their devastated industrial network and economy, Moscow immediately aimed to secure $10 billion in reparations, as well as strip Germany of its technological and military infrastructure. 21 The Russians equated the German landowners and their ‘feudal’ system with Nazism, and it was through communist agrarian reform that Soviet denazification was executed. 22 The destruction of Nazi monuments and major structures was another priority for the Russians. Whilst many had been damaged from extensive Allied air raids and the Soviet advance to Berlin, those left standing were soon destroyed. Speer’s New Chancellery, the Berlin Schloss and the Potsdam Schloss were all torn down and demolished by the Russians. In some cases, the Russians used the materials from the former structure to build monuments and memorials to their war efforts in Germany. 23 The processes of denazification in government, education and the arts followed.

The destruction of Nazi institutions- both physical and managerial- that had been staples of German society for over a decade had intense consequences for the psyche of the ordinary German. Whilst they may not have perceived themselves as impassioned, committed Nazis, they had participated in the regime and its societal structures. The entrenchment of Nazism in everyday life made it difficult for both the Allies and Germans to distinguish between party and person. The lack of distinction domestically resulted in a weakened distinction between the atrocities committed by the Nazi war machine and the

20 MacDonough, After the Reich, p. 269.
22 MacDonough, After the Reich, p. 205
23 Ibid., p. 206.
German at home. Thus, despite the savagery of the Soviet invasion and occupation, there was no room in post-war Germany for a narrative which presented Germany or its people as a victim to any degree. The literature that developed in the Allied zones of occupation at the time reflected these attitudes clearly. In his newspaper article ‘About the “Russians” and about Us’, Rudolf Herrnstadt criticized Germans who complained about their treatment at the hands of the Soviets, claiming that all crimes committed by the Red Army must be perceived as necessary in the context of the Soviet struggle against fascism. Further, whilst admitting that the Red Army’s behaviour in their march towards Berlin was ‘inflamed and raw’, the Germans had no right to complain as they had done nothing to prevent the war. Intellectuals contributed significantly to the ‘debate’. Professor Peter Steiniger echoed Herrnstadt, placing the blame of the Red Army crimes on the German people. He continued ‘those people who forced the Soviets into the whirlwind of war cannot now say “shame on the wild ones”’. Whilst confirming that the German people had been mistreated by the Red Army, critics such as Steiniger and Herrnstadt stop well short of referencing the violent rape that had occurred. Instead, euphemisms such as ‘having bikes taken’ or ‘watches stolen’ were employed. Throughout East Germany, discussion developed to focus less on the supposed German responsibility for the atrocities, and more on how the German should handle it moving forward. In the Soviet communist context, this of course meant embracing the socialist revolution. Alexander Abusch and other members of the German communist leadership, demanded that German men and women adopt the class struggle and unequivocally accept the Soviet doctrine.

The refusal to directly reference the occurrence of rape, and the discussion evolving to focus on the need for Germans to move past their mistreatment, had a significant effect on the trajectory of the historical and public discourse over the following decades. At public hearings run by German communist scholars and leaders, rhetoric portraying the virtue and honour of the Red Army soldier became more popular. Communist leaders maintained the Red Army were the unequivocal heroic liberators of Eastern Europe from the evil Nazi fascist regime. One panellist even claimed that rape did not occur in the Soviet Union during the

24 Naimark, The Russians in Germany, p. 135.
25 Ibid., p. 136.
26 Ibid., p. 136.
27 Ibid., p. 136.
28 Ibid., p. 136.
29 Ibid., p. 137.
1930s. As a result, claims of Soviet mistreatment were consequently treated as baseless pro-fascist, anti-Bolshevik propaganda. To criticise the actions and intentions of the Red Army soldier during World War II was to denounce the apparent utopian society that the Soviets had gifted the Germans. And to vocally denounce the Soviet system in Stalin’s East Germany would inevitably lead to a visit from the East German Stasi. References to the rape of German women by Red Army soldiers, as well as general mistreatment by Soviet combat and occupying forces, completely disappeared from the public sphere.

The relegation of public mass-rape discourse in the immediate post-war years however, cannot just be attributed to denazification and the Allied refusal to acknowledge Germany or its people as victims of the war. What must be noted is that the rape and violence against German women—both in the East and the West—continued after the conclusion of the war in the Allied zones. A public discussion on the atrocities committed against German women could not develop when women continued to be actively repressed violently. Regional military leadership and governance played a vital role in the prevalence of rape post-1945. Rates of violence against women dropped significantly when local commanders dealt with the issue. Yet when they decided to ignore or neglect the incidents, the impact on the local population was devastating. Attacks in regions such as Leipzig were frequent and brutal. In Frankfurt, women resorted to barricading themselves into their homes at night as the risk of rape from the Red Army soldier was too high. Similarly, women in Berlin complained that they could not travel via train to organise with other village women because of the high chance of being attacked and raped by a Red Army soldier.

The very real fear of sexual assault directly resulted in women isolating themselves from society and their peers. Whilst rape victims sharing their stories confidentially with other victims as a coping mechanism was common in the immediate post-war years, their ability to develop their shared experiences into a public history was severely hindered by these assembly constraints.

Whilst on a smaller scale, the rape and violence committed against women after the war was not isolated to the East. The behaviour of the Soviets was not absent from the Western zones. French soldiers had witnessed the Nazi invasion of the country—albeit not as

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30 Ibid., p. 138.
31 Ibid., p. 88.
32 Ibid., p. 89.
brutally as the Russians. They adhered to ‘never apologise, never explain’ in their approach to their treatment of women.\(^{34}\) Thousands of women were raped by French soldiers in Freudenstadt and Stuttgart. The rape by British soldiers and other labouring nationalities under their supervision has also been well documented. A senior British Army chaplain following the troops reported that there was ‘a good deal of rape going on’. He continued, ‘those who suffer [rape] have probably deserved it.\(^ {35}\) Similarly to the atrocities committed in the east, their prevalence relied on military leadership which took negligent or even encouraging attitudes. Repressive sexual violence was not just limited to rape. Engaging in prostitution as a means to survive and submitting to compliant sex with American GIs—where the consequences of not consenting were far worse than participating\(^ {36}\)—oppressed the German women’s ability to construct meaningful public discourse in the post-war occupation years.

The state-sponsored suppression of discussion in Soviet occupied Germany and the violence committed against German women in the post-war years explains the public ‘silence’ regarding the mass-rape of World War II. However they are limited in clarifying why there was such an outstanding lack of Western historical investigation in the 1950-1970s. The overwhelming majority of Russian historians were unwavering in their historical depiction of the Red Army as the heroic liberators of Europe from the terror and evils of Nazism. Writing more so for the benefit of the communist state’s narrative and less for historical balance and accuracy, the mistreatment of German women was not just relegated from conversation, but eliminated completely. For non-Russian historians living under the Soviet sphere of repression in the Eastern Bloc, it was not so much of an active neglect. Educators were purged, and any attempts at investigation or academic publication ran the high risk of arrest. Western historians did not have this ‘excuse’. Historians in America, Britain and France lived under the civil protections of their respective liberal democracies. Even as anti-German sentiments grew stronger as the atrocities committed during the Holocaust and the terrors of Nazi occupation were uncovered, Western historians did not experience the dangers of their Eastern counterparts. Yet the focus of Western historians

\(^{34}\) MacDonough, *After the Reich*, p. 270.


remained predominantly in their own nations’ efforts in the conflict and the Western Allied Front. On the rarer instances when Western literature concentrated on the Eastern Front, the Red Army’s mass-rape of German women was not mentioned. In his historiographical analysis, Mikkel Dack maintains that ‘Western scholarly interest in the Eastern Front and in German-Soviet relations was slow to develop. Early English publications were rare and covered only broad themes of warfare and military strategy’. The majority of the historical community largely disengaged with the issue despite the of shared rape experiences from West German women throughout the 1950s after the formation of the Federal Republic of Germany.

When the discussion from Western historians did transcend political and military themes in their focus on the Red Army’s behaviour on their march to Berlin, direct references to wide-spread rape were limited or vague. Whilst historians such as Erich Kuby in his 1968 book ‘The Russians and Berlin, 1945’ affirm that there certainly existed Russian sexual violence against German women, the author’s discussion of rape committed by Red Army soldiers concludes that when it did occur, the perpetrators were severely punished. This inaccurate version of events was likely influenced by the cooperation of the Soviet authorities to provide Kuby with ‘official sources’. The shared rape experiences of the 1950s declined in popularity due to their neglect from the Western historical community. Albert Seaton’s 1971 ‘The Russo-German War, 1941-1945’, provides references to the fear of the German population of the Red Army advance, but falls short in explicitly referencing the Soviet acts that had elicited such fear. Military and political focus continued to dominate Western historiography of the Eastern Front throughout the 1970s.

Given the obvious victimisation of women during the Red Army’s march into Germany, it is unsurprising that much of the initial scholarly interest into the rapes developed from a feminist understanding. This began to appear in the mid-1980s. Annemarie Tröger’s 1986 work ‘Between Rape and Prostitution’ details the sex work undertaken by masses of German women in Allied zones following the conclusion of the

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38 Ibid., p. 10.
41 Albert Seaton, The Russo-German War, 1941-1945 (London: Barker, 1971)
Second World War.\(^{43}\) Prostitution was not a lifestyle choice for German women in the post-war years, but a means of survival. To feed themselves and their families, as well as avoid the often-fatal consequences associated with resisting rape, the women participated in compliant sex. Works such as Tröger’s facilitated further research into the sexual experiences of German within a feminist framework. Atina Grossman developed Tröger’s argument almost a decade later by outlining the various experiences of German women that could be characterised as rape.\(^{44}\) She argued experiences ranging from public gang-rape, the slitting of a woman’s body from the stomach to anus, sex-slavery, violations, prostitution, abuse and theft were all components of a sexual violence spectrum in Soviet occupied Germany.\(^{45}\) Helke Sander’s 1992 film ‘BeFreier und BeFreite’ – ‘Liberators take Liberties’, shot as a documentary and with the assistance of historian Barbara Johr, examined the experiences of German women who were raped by Red Army soldiers through interviews.\(^{46}\) The scholarly and public reaction to the release of the film reflected attitudes of politicians and intellectuals who criticised German women for portraying themselves as victims in the immediate post-war era- albeit in a substantially less oppressive environment. As the film portrayed the mass-rape of German women as a continuation of traditional wartime patriarchal oppression, many criticised its refusal to discuss the obvious effects the atrocities committed by the Nazis had on the Red Army’s eventual retribution.\(^{47}\)

Whilst the influence from historians such as Tröger on subsequent feminist interpretations cannot be understated, the increase in the publication of specific rape incidents cannot be attributed to them. It was the end of the Cold War that made works such as ‘BeFreier und BeFreite’ and Atina Grossman’s ‘A Question of Silence: The Rape of German Women by Occupation Soldiers’ that contained vivid recollections of personal rape atrocities possible. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 transformed the historiography of the Soviet mass-rape into a mainstream focus.


\(^{45}\) Ibid., p. 54.

\(^{46}\) Helke Sander, BeFreier und BeFreite, (Bremer Institut Film & Fernsehen, 1992)

Historians were able to obtain previously unavailable Soviet archival information and records regarding the behaviour of Red Army soldiers. Additionally, accounts from victims in East Germany who had their experiences actively repressed by the Soviet regime for decades could now emerge. Historians could further develop the 1980s Cold War historiography of Andreas Hillgruber and Gordon Craig which referenced the atrocities of the Red Army, but lacked the sources to substantially explore them. Whilst the language barrier, complex archival system, and an uncooperative Russian administration increased difficulty to access, the newly released and available sources proved invaluable to historians. Instead of being tied to the constraints associated with debating the occurrence of the mass-rapes, historians could incorporate new engaging and sophisticated questions into their research.

One of the most discussed post-Cold War focuses has been the different explanations for why the mass-rape occurred. There are a multitude of historians who have presented explanations for the rapes committed by the Red Army. This essay will focus on the works of two key historians in this historiography; Norman Naimark’s ‘The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949’ and Antony Beevor’s ‘Berlin: The Downfall 1945’. Naimark’s 1995 book was the most extensive account of the Soviet mass-rape that had been released. Personal retribution played a key role in the mindset of the average Red Army soldier. Many soldiers had experienced the destruction and murder of their village and family during the Nazi invasion. Yet Naimark maintains that, whilst these emotions ran deep, it was the attitude of Red Army leadership, and the hate-generating Soviet propaganda machine that exasperated their brutal behaviour. Naimark reports on the attitudes of Stalin himself towards the mass-rape, providing statements from the dictator such as ‘Can’t he understand it if a soldier who has crossed thousands of kilometres through blood and fire and death has fun with a woman…?’ and ‘We lecture our soldiers too much...let them have some initiative’. Other military leaders such as Zhukov issued more explicit directives; ‘Woe to the land of the murderers... We will get our revenge

52 Naimark, The Russians in Germany, p. 72.
53 Ibid., p. 71.
for everything’. Naimark also points to the sentiments of the newspapers provided to Red Army soldiers on the front as incredibly significant to their ultraviolent attitudes. Newspapers encouraged soldiers to keep a record of the mistreatment of their own country and family at the hands of the Nazis as a reminder of what harm they should inflict on the German population.

Antony Beevor’s ‘Berlin: The Downfall 1945’ draws upon extensive Soviet records and traumatic personal accounts in depicting the mass-rape. As well as echoing many of Naimark’s claims, Beevor focuses heavily on the role alcohol and substance abuse played in heightening the prevalence of the rapes, as well as increasing their violence. Beevor argues that excessive alcohol consumption trumped sentiments of revenge in contributing to rapes. When drunk, Red Army soldiers disregarded the nationality of their victim. Polish women, victims themselves of the Nazi regime, were raped by the Red Army at will. When alcohol supplies ran low, Red Army soldiers turned to consuming chemicals from workshops and laboratories. When a soldier was inebriated to the point where they physically were incapable of committing the act of rape themselves- convinced the German still needed to be sadistically humiliated- used the bottle to devastating effect. Beevor also points to indirect forces that caused the atrocities. Stalin’s insistence of the complete desexualisation of Soviet society resulted in dehumanised attitudes towards sexual conduct. Sex education was eliminated from schools and thus most Red Army soldiers suffered ‘from sexual ignorance and utterly unenlightened attitudes towards women’. Naimark and Beevor’s evidence demonstrates that a combination of societal policies, leadership directives, and physical forces only elevated the Red Army’s existing mindset of retribution and revenge.

The neglect from Western historians to discuss the most immense mass-rape in modern times is a massive historiographical oversight, even if the civilian victims shared a common nationality with an evil fascist regime. German women were deprived of their ability to share their experiences in an open environment, and continued to be physically and sexually repressed in all zones of Allied occupation. The mid-1980s saw a significant development in historians’ willingness to overcome the popular notion that Germany was

54 Ibid., p. 72.  
55 Ibid., p. 72.  
57 Ibid., p. 31.  
58 Ibid., p. 31.  
59 Ibid., p. 32.
not to be presented as a victim of the Second World War. Historians began to confront and explore the issue of Red Army mass-rape, and their ability to do so effectively was considerably enhanced following the conclusion of the Cold War. Further historiographical investigation is required on the refusal for modern Russian historians to concede the prevalence and scale of the mass-rape by Red Army soldiers, as well as the extent of knowledge of the Soviet leadership at the time. Further exploration is also necessary into the recent banning of Beevor’s books in select Russian schools and colleges, as well as the suppression of the rapes in the Russian education system.

Bibliography


