

# **The Rape of Berlin**

By Abby Scott

## ***About the Author***

Abby is a third-year undergraduate at the University of Guelph, studying History. *The Rape of Berlin* is related to gender and sexuality because the Soviet army committed horrendous acts of rape, violence, and humiliation against women while ‘liberating’ Berlin from the Nazis during the Second World War. Throughout the years, Abby has developed various interests in history, including the history of gender in Asia and Islamic Law. She knows her career will be related to one of these topics, but nothing else can be foreseen at the moment.

After her B.A., she hopes to find a school in which to study for a Master’s Degree. In her free time, she enjoys reading about sharks, drinking craft beers, and listening to the album “Folklore” by Taylor Swift. She extends a big thank-you to Professor Norman Smith and the editors at Footnotes for this opportunity.

**Trigger Warning:** Sexual Violence

The Rape of Berlin was the mass rape of German women by the Soviet army in the final weeks of the Second World War (1939-1945) when the Soviets invaded Germany. On the retreating Eastern front and in Berlin, the Soviet army carried out atrocious acts of rape, violence, and humiliation against women while 'liberating' Germany. While the various discourse on the topic reaches different and sometimes contradictory conclusions, there is no question that the acts against these women were degrading and harmful both physically and mentally. In the final few weeks of the war, European women experienced mass rape on an unprecedented scale for a European conflict. Even when the war ended, women in Eastern Germany still had to deal with these attacks and live among their attackers. The atrocities that occurred did not impact a small group of people, it impacted and subjugated millions of German women and women of other nationalities.

Although violence against women was committed by many armies that were involved in the Second World War, this paper will focus on the violence against women committed by the Red Army. The Second World War placed many German women in a situation where they were forced to use sex to survive. Many scholars view the occurrence of rape in warfare as simply an act of war or have presented these acts in a more symbolic way, representing the 'masculinity' of a soldier or the pride of a nation. The actions of the Red Army have also been interpreted as revenge against the Nazis for their invasion of Russia in the early war and the rapes and murders committed by the Nazis against Russian women. As the war progressed, many German women had to turn to prostitution to survive. More often than not, this was an act of desperation rather than a personal choice. Women's vulnerability was not exclusive to poor German women, but all classes, as many German middle-class women were also put in a position where prostitution was the only option, illustrating the already vulnerable position women were in because of society and because of the conflict. This paper will look at the way Nazi Germany perceived and treated women and how the wartime economy and occupation politics had such severe impacts for women. Sexual violence was forced upon German women in many ways by the Russian army, but women were already forced into a situation of sexual vulnerability because of the economic and political desperation caused by the war.

The mass rape that took place at the end of the Second World War and into the peacetime carried out by the Soviets had been the largest in a European conflict.<sup>1</sup> Although the rape of Berlin was the most infamous case of the mass rapes, taking place from April 24 to May 5, 1945, the sexual violence against women was not exclusive to this time frame. The rapes began during the Soviet offensive and continued after peace was declared.<sup>2</sup> The first gang and murder

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<sup>1</sup> Naimark N.M. (2012) The Russians and Germans: Rape during the War and Post-Soviet Memories. In: Branche R., Virgili F. (eds) Rape in Wartime. *Gender and Sexualities in History*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137283399\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137283399_15) p.202

<sup>2</sup> Grossmann, Atina. "A Question of Silence: The Rape of German Women by Occupation Soldiers." *October* 72 (1995): 43-63. Accessed November 28, 2020. doi:10.2307/778926. P. 46

rapes happened in April 1944 in East Prussia.<sup>3</sup> The violence against women was experienced in Budapest in February 1945 and Austria, as no ‘distinctions’ were made between German and Austrian women by the Soviet soldiers.<sup>4</sup> Also, Jewish women who managed to evade and or escape Nazi persecution fell victim to Soviet soldiers even though they were the ones being liberated.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that 1 in 3 women were raped by Allied Soviet troops and a smaller amount raped by British and American troops, although the numbers often vary. In Berlin alone, 130,000 girls and women were raped, though this number is likely much higher due to repeated gang rapes.<sup>6</sup>

Many have argued that these rapes had several meanings behind them. Mass rape in warfare can be seen as “a means of humiliating the Other and destroying a society’s cultural, traditional, and religious integrity.”<sup>7</sup> Women are often seen as a symbol of the nation or at least as something that needs to be protected by the nation. The sexual assault of an “enemy” female can symbolize victory over the enemy men and a total defeat over the “other” nation. The mass rape was a result of Soviet nationalism, militarism and patriarchal masculinity. Ultimately, the actions of the Soviet soldiers in the Second World War established “masculine domination over Other women, Other men, and the Other nation; it symbolized the defeat of the entire Nazi nation by the masculine Red Army soldier hero.”<sup>8</sup> While degrading German women, the Soviets also emasculated German men and labeled them ‘impotent’ since they were not able to protect German women. The “sexual violence against their [German] women is but one of the ways to destroy their national pride, manhood, and honor. What results is the commonly seen connection between sex and violence in war.”<sup>9</sup> The problem with establishing symbolism behind the rapes is that it often takes away from the trauma and suffering of the female victim and makes it a much broader national issue or emphasizes a slight against the men of the nation.

Many have suggested that the Soviets raped at such a catastrophic scale to exact revenge on the Nazis for their brutality while invading the Soviet Union from June 22 to December 5 in 1941 under Operation Barbarossa, and their general brutality throughout the rest of the war. An interview conducted by Svetlana Alexievich, a Russian historian, illustrates the barbarism towards

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<sup>3</sup> Naimark N.M. (2012) *The Russians and Germans: Rape during the War and Post-Soviet Memories* p.202

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* p.202

<sup>5</sup> Messerschmidt, James. “Review Symposium: The Forgotten Victims of World War II: Masculinities and Rape in Berlin, 1945.” *Violence against women* 12, no. 7 (July 2006): 706–712. Pg. 708

<sup>6</sup> Messerschmidt, James. “Review Symposium: The Forgotten Victims of World War II: Masculinities and Rape in Berlin, 1945.” pg. 706.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* pg. 709.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* pg. 710.

<sup>9</sup> Albanese, P. (2001). Nationalism, war, and archaization of gender relations in the Balkans. *Violence Against Women*, 7, 999-1023. Pg. 1011

Russian women by the Nazis. In this case, Russian female soldiers came across a young Russian nurse: “We found her: eyes put out, breasts cut off. They had impaled her on a stake... It was freezing cold, and she was white as could be, and her hair was all gray... She was nineteen years old.”<sup>10</sup> The interviewee, who is not named, also describes that the Germans would not take female prisoners. Whether the women were nurses or soldiers in the war, they would automatically be shot. It was this treatment of Russian women on the Eastern front that led many to believe that the Soviets were ‘getting back’ at the Nazis for what they had done earlier in the war. The Germans did establish a reputation for brutality against Russian soldiers, civilians, and prisoners of war, and many commanders saw the violence in their advance into Germany as ‘justice playing itself out’.<sup>11</sup> The revenge that the Soviets desired could also have been a response to how long and ferociously the Germans defended the Eastern front even though it was clear that the war would be an Allied victory, resulting in millions of unnecessary casualties accompanied by the scorched earth tactic the German army used while retreating.<sup>12</sup>

Detaching the acts of rape from any symbolic notion leaves these actions as just an act or side effect of war. Susan Brownmiller, author of the 1975 book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, created a problematic but useful analysis of rape. Specifically in a wartime situation, she suggests that on the basis of a patriarchal society in peacetime: “when given the opportunity, for instance during war or military occupation, men should indeed be expected to rape.”<sup>13</sup> Many feminist thinkers since 1975 have pointed out several problems with Brownmiller’s work, such as the generalization that all men are rapists, and that her analysis leaves little room for “women’s sexual agency.”<sup>14</sup> The idea that men are ‘expected’ to rape in wartime takes away the symbolism behind wartime rape and implies that it is just a part of the war. This analysis of wartime rape also would not leave space for the role that Soviet revenge had played in their actions in Berlin and in greater Germany.

Journalist and historian Svetlana Alexievich conducted a series of interviews of mainly Russian women to preserve an oral history of women in war. Alexievich also interviewed Russian men, one of whom was a soldier advancing into Germany in the final stages of the war:

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<sup>10</sup> Alexievich, Svetlana. Interview with unnamed Russian soldier. *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*. New York: Random House, 2018. Pg. 123

<sup>11</sup> Slaveski, F. (2013). The Soviet Occupation of Germany: Hunger, Mass Violence and the Struggle for Peace, 1945–1947. In *The Soviet Occupation of Germany*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107340633> Pg. 7

<sup>12</sup> Bos, Pascale R. “Feminists Interpreting the Politics of Wartime Rape: Berlin, 1945; Yugoslavia, 1992–1993.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, no. 4 (June 2006): 995–1025. Pg. 1003

<sup>13</sup> Bos, Pascale R. “Feminists Interpreting the Politics of Wartime Rape: Berlin, 1945; Yugoslavia, 1992–1993.” Pg. 998

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* Pg. 998

.... The first German villages... We're young. Strong. Four years without women... We'd catch German girls and... Ten men violated one girl... There weren't enough women, the population fled before the Soviet army, we found young ones. Twelve or thirteen years old... If she cried, we'd beat her, stuff something into her mouth. It was painful for her, but funny for us...<sup>15</sup>

This specific interview suggests that the meaning behind the attacks had little to do with masculinity, humiliating enemy men, or getting revenge. The attacks happened simply because of several years without women. The mass rape was not a formal war strategy of the Red Army, but it did instill terror for those in Berlin, forcing civilians to follow the demands of the Soviets or face severe repercussions. Although rape is an act of war, the sexual violence that occurred during the Battle of Berlin and in the Soviet occupation were much more than just sex. It was an act of violence, degradation, and humiliation with the intent to cause the maximum suffering and discomfort for the female.

In 1945, Germany was under Allied military occupation and was experiencing increased loss of economic independence.<sup>16</sup> The Soviet government under Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) did little to prevent the mass rape of German women and the other violence that the German people were subjected to under the occupying Soviets. Stalin allowed his soldiers to have “fun with a woman or some trifle” because he would not indict his soldiers for these actions.<sup>17</sup> Postwar Germany was in sheer chaos, the economy was crippled, there was no policy that protected German civilians, and little punishment for Russian occupants, which allowed them to do as they pleased. The Soviet Military Administration in Germany (SVAG) was put in charge of the chaotic situation in Germany and was rather ineffective. Politics and law enforcement were ineffective due to the attitudes of many SVAG men. An example of this occurred in mid-May 1946. Local German police in Heiligenstadt made the SVAG aware of a rape that had taken place by Soviet soldiers. Local police forces were unable to arrest the occupation force and made several requests for the SVAG to arrest and apprehend the suspected rapists. The response of the SVAG illustrates the ineffective law enforcement that took over in occupied Germany:

The Hegen police established the whereabouts of the rapists and once again telephoned the komendatura asking that they come and collect the afore mentioned persons. The answer to this request from the

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<sup>15</sup> Alexievich, Svetlana. Interview with unnamed Russian soldier. *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*. New York: Random House, 2018. Pg. 36

<sup>16</sup> Pg. 194 Pg. 193 Continuum of sexual violence

<sup>17</sup> Slavetski, F. (2013). The Soviet Occupation of Germany: Hunger, Mass Violence and the Struggle for Peace, 1945–1947. In *The Soviet Occupation of Germany*. Pg. 6

komendatura was, ‘All of our soldiers are home, and we have no business with the others.’<sup>18</sup>

This case was just one of many, but the inaction and the belief that German people were “others” characterizes the way in which the early politics of Soviet-occupied Germany were used. It also illustrates the reluctance of Soviet officials to apprehend troop violence and in doing so, made no effort to prevent violence and sexual violence against German civilians, and in particular, German women.

The war left nearly all German civilians in a dire situation, many of whom were desperate for basic necessities. Even prior to the war in Nazi Germany, women were already in a subdued and separate social status. Women were expected to be gentlewomen who stood behind the strong men and cooperate “under the stern guidance of an orderly state.”<sup>19</sup> Many women feared and even expected the Soviet soldiers to rape even before the Soviets occupied Germany due to the Nazi propaganda that presented the Soviets as “barbaric hordes of Asiatics” and “Jewish-Bolshevik rapists.”<sup>20</sup> The socio-economic position Germany faced forced many women into prostitution as it was one of the only options for survival and it served as a form of protection against multiple rapes from different soldiers. Many realized that “it was pointless to try to resist armed Soviet soldiers,” thus “more and more people chose to protect themselves by cooperating with the regime or fleeing from it—physically and mentally.”<sup>21</sup> The “cooperation” oftentimes meant sex work for German women, because this work was helpful in preventing gang rapes, even though gang rapes still occurred.

Sexual violence can be seen in many forms other than rape; it can also include verbal sexual harassment. Sexual violence can also take the form of compliant sex which became especially common in Germany, meaning “the consequences of not doing it are worse than the consequences of doing it.”<sup>22</sup> The situation in Germany under Soviet occupation and with the post-war economy made prostitution one of the only avenues for survival. Many women became prostitutes and would exchange sex for food and other basic needs. Women would also try to avoid rape by exchanging sex for protection by aligning themselves with one Soviet officer. It is estimated that there were 50,000 prostitutes in Berlin, both professional and semi-professional, and that the number of prostitutes tripled by the end of 1946.<sup>23</sup> The Sexual violence and harassment continued well into

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid Pg. 68

<sup>19</sup> Koonz, Claudia. *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* 1st ed. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987. Pg. XX

<sup>20</sup> Naimark N.M. (2012) *The Russians and Germans: Rape during the War and Post-Soviet Memories*. p.202

<sup>21</sup> Slavski, F. (2013). *The Soviet Occupation of Germany: Hunger, Mass Violence and the Struggle for Peace, 1945–1947*. In *The Soviet Occupation of Germany*. Pg. 70

<sup>22</sup> Teo, H. (1996). The continuum of sexual violence in occupied Germany, 1945–49. *Women’s History Review*, 5(2), 191–218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612029600200111> Pg. 193

<sup>23</sup> Teo, H. (1996). The continuum of sexual violence in occupied Germany, 1945–49. Pg. 192

peacetime in Eastern Germany from 1945-1949 in the forms of rape, prostitution, verbal and physical abuse, sexual harassment, and murder.<sup>24</sup>

The sexual violence that took place in Germany in the Second World War at the hands of the Red Army resulted in roughly 10,000 deaths. Many women committed suicide, either by personal choice or being forced by family, and some were killed by their husbands for “consenting” to sex with an Allied soldier.<sup>25</sup> In the immediate post-war period, the sexual violence that occurred was scarcely discussed by German women due to fear of repercussions. It remained this way until the 1950’s, when British and American publishers took interest in these stories. Publishing the stories of German women who were raped by Russian soldiers served as decent anti-Soviet propaganda during the Cold War.<sup>26</sup> It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that publications came out that included rapes committed not just by Soviet soldiers but also French, British, and American soldiers.<sup>27</sup>

Overall, the Rape of Berlin that took place in the final weeks of the war and the occupation of Germany by the Soviets proved to be catastrophic for women and girls of all ages. There are many ways to analyze the events that took place and the motives, if there were any, behind them. The Red Army was ruthless in their occupation because of nationalism, militarism, patriarchy, and revenge. The awful acts separated German women from Russian men by subjugating and by treating them as less than human by repeatedly and brutally raping them. Germany was left in shambles by the end of the Second World War and with little options to turn to women were often forced to use sex to survive. German women, however victimized they were, did manage to get through their experiences and managed to support themselves and their families in spite of the world around them. Sexual violence in warfare is not just a simple act of a soldier, it is an act that dehumanizes the victim and has lifelong impacts.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid Pg. 192

<sup>25</sup> Ibid Pg. 191

<sup>26</sup> Ibid Pg. 195.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid Pg. 195

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