

Lees-Knowles Lectures
Cambridge 2002-3

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War and Rape, Germany 1945

‘Red Army soldiers don't believe in “individual liaisons” with German women’, wrote the playwright Zakhar Agranenko in his diary when serving as an officer of marine infantry in East Prussia. ‘Nine, ten, twelve men at a time - they rape them on a collective basis’.

The Soviet armies advancing into East Prussia in January 1945, in huge, long columns were an extraordinary mixture of modern and mediaeval: tank troops in padded black helmets, Cossack cavalymen on shaggy mounts with loot strapped to the saddle, Lend-Lease Studebakers and Dodges towing light field guns, and then a second echelon in horse-drawn carts. The variety of character among the soldiers was almost as great as their military equipment. There were freebooters who drank and raped quite shamelessly, and there were idealistic, austere Communists and members of the intelligentsia genuinely appalled by such behaviour.

Beria and Stalin back in Moscow knew perfectly well what was going on from a number of detailed reports sent by generals commanding the NKVD rifle divisions in charge of rear area security. One stated that ‘many Germans declare that all German women in East Prussia who stayed behind were raped by Red Army soldiers’. This opinion was presumably shared by the authorities, since if they had disagreed, they would have added the ritual formula: ‘This is a clear case of slander against the Red Army.’ In fact numerous examples of gang rape were given in a number of other reports – ‘girls under eighteen and old women included’. ‘Under eighteen’, it emerged, meant from ten upwards.

Even General Okorokov, the chief of the political department of 2nd Belorussian Front, opposed any tightening of discipline to prevent rape at a meeting on 6 February. He termed it a ‘refusal to take revenge on the enemy’. In Moscow, the authorities were less worried about rape and murder than about the senseless destruction. On 9 February, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, declared in an editorial that ‘every breach of military discipline only weakens the victorious Red Army . . . Our revenge is not blind. Our anger is not irrational. In a moment of blind rage one is apt to destroy a factory in conquered enemy territory – a factory that would be of value to us.’

The more intelligent junior officers were deeply disturbed, and they knew that they were virtually powerless to stop it. ‘All these rapes diminish the dignity of the army and of every Russian,’ Senior Lieutenant Safonov said to his friend Inozemtsev in East Prussia in January 1945. ‘This is also bound to destroy discipline and reduce the fighting capacity of the army. It is going to be exceptionally hard to control all these animal instincts which have got out of hand.’

Marshal Rokossovsky issued order No. 006 in an attempt to direct ‘the feelings of hatred at fighting the enemy on the battlefield’. It appears to have had little effect. There were also a few arbitrary attempts to exert authority. The commander of one rifle division is said to have ‘personally shot a lieutenant who was lining up a group of his men before a German woman spread-eagled on the ground’. But either officers were involved themselves, or the lack of discipline made it too dangerous to restore order over drunken soldiers armed with sub machine guns. In a society as strictly controlled as the Soviet Union, the lack of control over soldiers of the Red Army initially strikes one as rather bewildering.

Calls to avenge the Motherland, violated by the Wehrmacht's invasion, had given the idea that almost any cruelty would be allowed. Even if Ilya Ehrenburg was not responsible for the most notorious statement attributed to him – German propaganda claimed that he had urged the soldiers of the Red Army to take German women as their lawful booty and break their racial pride – he did describe Germany as ‘The Blonde Witch’, a figure of hate calculated to stir up violence against German women. Even many young women soldiers and medics in the Red Army did not appear to disapprove of rape. ‘Our soldiers' behaviour towards Germans, particularly German women, is absolutely correct!’, said a twenty-one year-old woman soldier from Agranenko’s reconnaissance detachment. A number seemed to find it amusing. Several German women recorded how Soviet servicewomen watched and laughed when they were raped.

But some Soviet women were deeply shaken by what they witnessed in Germany. Natalya Gesse, a close friend of the scientist Andrei Sakharov, had observed the Red Army in action in 1945 as a Soviet war correspondent. ‘The Russian soldiers were raping every German female from eight to eighty’, she recounted later. ‘It was an army of rapists’. Natalya Gesse illustrated the prevalent attitude with a common joke of the time. ‘A soldier is demobilized and sent home from Germany. His wife welcomes her conquering hero home. They have a meal and they drink and then they go to bed. But he can’t get aroused. So, he says to her: “Get out of bed!” She gets out of bed. “Get dressed!” he says, and she gets dressed. “Now,” he says, “put up a fight”.’

Attitudes in Russia do not seem to have changed very much over the years. A few months ago, a Russian interpreter hired by the BBC was outraged when she came across a German woman's description of her rape by Red Army soldiers. 'If it's true, then she must have wanted it', she commented angrily. And in Helsinki a few weeks ago, I was attacked by a young pro-Soviet Finnish woman, who made the extraordinary statement that I had not made any allowance for the poverty of Red Army soldiers, because this had meant that they could not afford prostitutes. As you might imagine, I was left flabbergasted by such an excuse for rape, above all from a woman.

On the other hand, some women soldiers, such as Yelena Rzhnevskaya, an interpreter with the 3rd Shock Army, and a friend of hers, certainly did not make fun of German women victims. They were deeply shaken by what they witnessed in Germany. 'On the route to Germany,' wrote Rzhnevskaya later, 'rape had become acceptable.' She rightly ascribed this to the absence of punishment. 'As soon as the order was given to stop it, they managed to get it under control, so it was in the commander's power to stop it.' Rzhnevskaya spent much time talking to German women, and won their trust. She knew that they were speaking the truth. She also observed, and this, I think, is very interesting, that even within the Red Army, the attitudes of male soldiers changed towards their own servicewomen as soon as they advanced onto foreign territory. Apparently, once on foreign soil, many men began to behave like a conqueror towards their own female comrades. 'On the route to Germany,'

It is naturally impossible to define how much of their behaviour could be ascribed to a definite desire for vengeance. 'I was like a beast who wanted revenge', said one Red Army soldier. But many of them tried to excuse their behaviour as an act of revenge for all the terrible things done by the Wehrmacht in the Soviet Union. Even Red Army reports acknowledged that this was just a 'pretext'. German women were widely seen as carnal booty. They were also seen as arrogant and, as Norman Naimark has argued in his book *The Russians in Germany*, Red Army soldiers suffered from an inferiority complex on finding a society that was so much richer and better ordered than what they had known in the Soviet Union. But one might also consider another partial explanation of Red Army conduct. Did they also feel a need to exert sexual domination because of the secret humiliations of powerlessness within a totalitarian system? What one might call the knock-on theory of oppression. Red Army soldiers had been treated as dispensable objects. The system had even demanded that all items of clothing should be stripped from their corpses before burial so that they could be re-used, a humiliation which was bitterly resented by the comrades of the fallen. In the closing stages of the war, when the need for such bureaucratic miserliness was even harder

to justify, such measures caused severe discontent, almost leading to a minor revolt.

German crimes in the Soviet Union and the Soviet regime's relentless propaganda certainly contributed to the terrible violence. But once soldiers had alcohol inside them, the nationality of their prey made little difference. The writer, Lev Kopelev, described hearing a 'frenzied scream' in Allenstein. He saw a girl, 'her long, braided blond hair disheveled, her dress torn, shouting piercingly: "I'm Polish! Jesus Mary, I'm Polish!".' She was pursued by two inebriated 'tankists' in full view of everyone.

Drink of every variety, including dangerous chemicals seized from laboratories and workshops, was a major factor in the violence. The greatest mistake of the German military authorities had been to order that stocks of alcohol should not be destroyed in the retreat as this would help intoxicate their enemy. But this decision, while of doubtful military benefit, was a disaster for German women. It seems as if Soviet soldiers needed alcoholic courage to attack a woman. But then, all too often, they drank too much and, unable to complete the act, used the bottle instead with appalling effect. A number of victims were mutilated obscenely.

Alcohol, especially Russian binge-drinking, as many Germans testify, produced a violent character change. That great diarist, Viktor Klemperer noted of Soviet troops: 'in a sober state usually good-natured, in a drunken state quite wild, theft of watches and jewellery, frequent rapes.'

The subject of the Red Army's mass rapes in Germany has been so repressed in Russia, that even today veterans refuse to acknowledge what really happened. The tiny handful prepared to speak openly, however, are totally unrepentant. 'They all lifted their skirts for us and lay on the bed', said the Komsomol leader in a tank company. He even went on to boast that 'two million of our children were born' in Germany.

The capacity of Soviet officers to convince themselves that most of the victims were either happy with their fate, or at least accepted that it was their turn to suffer after what the Wehrmacht had done in Russia, is striking. 'Our fellows were so sex-starved', a Soviet major told the British journalist Alexander Werth, 'that they often raped old women of sixty, seventy or even eighty – much to these grandmothers' surprise, if not downright delight'. This officer, like Soviet veterans today, avoided the obvious point that women justifiably terrified of violence, are unlikely to resist, and this does certainly not signify consent. In his prose poem, *Prussian Nights*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn described in what appears to be a remarkably honest autobiographical account, how in East Prussia his battery sergeant sent him a German girl from their unit laundry. She was totally passive, but Solzhentisyn did not delude himself and was ashamed.

One can only scratch at the surface of the psychological contradictions in the Red Army. When gang-raped women in Königsberg begged their attackers afterwards to put them out of their misery, the Red Army men appear to have felt insulted. 'Russian soldiers do not shoot women,' they replied. 'Only German soldiers do that.' The Red Army had managed to convince itself that because it had assumed the moral mission to liberate Europe from fascism it could behave entirely as it liked, both personally and politically.

Domination and humiliation permeated most soldiers' treatment of women in East Prussia. The victims not only bore the brunt of revenge for Wehrmacht crimes, they also represented an atavistic target as old as war itself. Rape is the act of a conqueror, Susan Brownmiller observed in her book on rape in war, *Against Their Will*. It is aimed at the 'bodies of the defeated enemy's women' to emphasize the warrior's victory. In East Prussia, rape was an act of violence rather than one of sexual desire. Yet the pattern changed in the spring of 1945. After the initial fury during the assault on East Prussia had dissipated, the sadism became less marked. By the time the Red Army reached Berlin three months later, its soldiers tended to regard German women more as a casual right of conquest. The sense of domination certainly continued, but this was perhaps partly an indirect product of those humiliations which they themselves had suffered at the hands of their commanders and the Soviet authorities as a whole.

Although no clear answer is ever likely to be possible, it is worth looking at a number of other forces or influences which were at work. The brutal promiscuity of village life, has been mentioned, both before the revolution and after it. This, paradoxically, was often combined with a marked ignorance of sexual matters. Sexual freedom had been a subject for lively debate within Communist Party circles during the 1920s, but during the following decade, Stalin ensured that Soviet society depicted itself as virtually asexual. This had nothing to do with genuine puritanism: it was because love and sex did not fit in with dogma designed to 'deindividualize' the individual. Human urges and emotions had to be suppressed. Freud's work was banned, divorce and adultery were matters for strong Party disapproval. Criminal sanctions against homosexuality were reintroduced. The new doctrine extended even to the complete suppression of sex education. In graphic art, the clothed outline of a woman's breasts was regarded as dangerously erotic. They had to be disguised under boiler suits. The regime clearly wanted any form of desire to be converted into love for the Party and above all for Comrade Stalin.

Most ill-educated Red Army soldiers, especially those from traditional societies in Central Asia, suffered from sexual ignorance and utterly unenlightened attitudes towards women. So the Soviet state's attempts to suppress the libido of its people created what one Russian

writer described as a sort of ‘barracks eroticism’ which was far more primitive and violent than ‘the most sordid foreign pornography’. All this was combined with the dehumanising influence of modern propaganda and the atavistic, warring impulses of men marked by fear and suffering. As Rzhevskaya observed: Many young men had learned to shoot and stab before they had even kissed a girl.

But there was also a political dimension. The Soviet authorities, no doubt to save Stalin from blame for the disaster of 1941, had managed to inculcate a sense of collective guilt in the Soviet people that they had allowed the Motherland to be invaded. And in the summer of 1942 as the Wehrmacht advanced towards the Volga and into the Caucasus, the Soviet authorities made much of the image of ‘the violation of the Motherland’. An element of guilt, no doubt, increases the violence of revenge. But the form the ‘revenge’ took in 1945 was simply terrorizing and punishing women who had never been to the Soviet Union. As I mentioned earlier, even Red Army reports acknowledged that ‘revenge’ was all too often a ‘pretext’ for rape. This is why the vast majority of Russians have such trouble re-examining the propaganda assumptions of the Great Patriotic War.

Berlin women refer bitterly to the huge Red Army monument in the Treptower Park, a vast statue depicting a Soviet soldier cradling a child in his arms, as the Tomb of the Unknown Rapist. Yet to this day, the Russian authorities, most veterans and even historians, refuse to face uncomfortable facts about the less glorious aspect of the Red Army’s liberation of central Europe from Nazism. Nothing was of course written about it at the time. Any allegation was treated as slander against the Red Army, but perhaps as more contemporaneous accounts are published, the truth may start to be accepted in Russia.

Very little has so far been published there written by witnesses to the rapes. For obvious reasons, they kept any accounts hidden in their notebooks. The novelist Vasily Grossman, a war correspondent attached to the Red Army, was with the 8th Guards Army when the town of Schwerin, east of the Oder, was sacked. ‘Everything is on fire’, he jotted down in pencil in a small notebook. ‘An old woman jumps from a window in a burning building. . . Looting is going on. . . At the [town] commandant’s office, a German woman dressed in black and with dead lips is speaking in a weak, whispering voice. There is a girl with her who has black bruises on her neck and face, a swollen eye and terrible bruises on her hands. The girl was raped by a soldier from the headquarters signals company. He is also present. He has a full, red face and looks sleepy. The commandant is questioning them all together.’ Grossman noted the ‘horror in the eyes of women and girls. . . Terrible things are happening to German women. A cultivated German man explains with expressive gestures and broken

Russian words that his wife has been raped by ten men that day. . . Soviet girls who have been liberated from camps are suffering greatly too. Last night some of them hid in the room provided for the war correspondents. Screams wake us up in the night. One of the correspondents could not restrain himself. An animated discussion takes place, and order is restored.’ Grossman then noted what he had evidently heard about a young German mother. She was being raped continuously in a farm shed. Her relatives came nervously to ask the soldiers to allow her a break to breast-feed the baby because it would not stop crying. All this was taking place next to a headquarters and in the sight of officers supposedly responsible for discipline.

Grossman soon discovered that rape victims were not just Germans. Polish women also suffered. So did young Russian, Belorussian and Ukrainian women who had been sent back to Germany by the Wehrmacht for slave labour. ‘Liberated Soviet girls quite often complain that our soldiers rape them’, he noted. ‘One girl said to me in tears: “He was an old man, older than my father”.’

The rape of Polish and Soviet women and girls seriously undermines Russian attempts to justify Red Army behaviour on the grounds of revenge for German brutality in the Soviet Union. On 29 March, the Central Committee of the Komsomol informed Stalin's associate, Malenkov, of a report from the 1st Ukrainian Front. ‘On the night of 24 February’, General Tsygankov recorded in the first of many examples, ‘a group of 35 provisional lieutenants on a course and their battalion commander entered the women's dormitory in the village of Grutenberg, 10 kilometres east of Els, and raped them.’

‘In the town of Bunslau, there are over 100 women and girls in the headquarters. They live in a separate building not far from the kommandantur, but there is no security there and because of this, there are many offences and even the rape of women who live in this dormitory by different soldiers who enter at night and terrorize the women. On 5 March late at night, sixty officers and soldiers entered, mainly from the 3rd Guards Tank Army. Most of them were drunk, and they attacked and offended against women and girls. Even though they were ordered by the commandant to leave the dormitory, the group of tankists threatened him with their guns and caused a scuffle. . . This is not the only incident. It happens every night. Those who stay in Bunslau are frightened and demoralised and there is much dissatisfaction among them. One of them Maria Shapoval said: “I waited for the Red Army for days and nights. I waited for my liberation, and now our soldiers treat us worse than the Germans did. I am not happy to be alive”.’ ‘It was very hard to stay with Germans’, Klavdia Malaschenko said, ‘but now it is very unhappy. This is not liberation. They treat us terribly. They do terrible things to us.’

‘There are many cases of offences against them’, Tsygankov continued. ‘There are also many offences by officers against women. Three officers on 26 February entered the dormitory in the bread depot, and when Major Soloviev (the commandant) tried to stop them, one of them, a major, said: “I’ve just come from the front and I need a woman”. After that he debauched himself in the dormitory.’

‘All this’, Tsygankov's long report concluded, ‘provides fertile ground for unhealthy, negative moods to grow among liberated Soviet citizens; it causes discontent and mistrust before their return to their mother country.’ His recommendations, however, did not focus on tightening Red Army discipline. He suggested instead that the main political department of the Red Army and the Komsomol should concentrate on ‘improving political and cultural work with repatriated Soviet citizens’ so that they should not return home with negative ideas about the Red Army.

In Berlin, many women were simply not prepared for the shock of Russian mass rapes, however much horror propaganda they had heard from Goebbels. Many reassured themselves that although the danger must be great out in the countryside, mass rapes could hardly take place in the city in front of everybody.

In Dahlem, Soviet officers visited Sister Kunigunde, the mother superior of Haus Dahlem, a maternity clinic and orphanage. The officers and their men behaved impeccably. In fact, the officers even warned Sister Kunigunde about the second line troops following on behind. Their prediction proved entirely accurate, but there was no chance of escape. Nuns, young girls, old women, pregnant women and mothers who had just given birth were all raped without pity. One woman compared events in Dahlem to ‘the horrors of the Middle Ages’. Others thought of the Thirty Years War.

Yet this outburst of violence, more like the attacks on women in East Prussia, was rare in Berlin. A pattern emerged of soldiers flashing torches in the faces of women huddled in the bunkers to choose their victims. This process of selection, as opposed to the indiscriminate violence shown earlier, indicates a definite change. By this stage Soviet soldiers had started to treat German women more as sexual spoils of war, than as substitutes for the Wehrmacht on which to vent their pent-up rage.

Rape has often been defined by writers on the subject as an act of violence which has little to do with sex. But that is a definition from the victim’s perspective. To understand the crime, however, one needs to see things from the perpetrator's point of view, especially in the later stages of the Soviet invasion when unaggravated rape had succeeded the extreme violence of January and February. A third stage emerged as the battles ended, and a fourth stage after that, as we will see.

The other tenet of most feminist writers on the subject is that rape is a strategy of war. This is undoubtedly accurate in certain cases, but far from a universal truth. There are some clear examples of rape being used as a terror tactic. For example, in the summer and early autumn of 1936, when Franco's Army of Africa advanced on Madrid from Anadaluia, Nationalist officers encouraged their Moroccan *regulares* to rape the wives and daughters of left wingers. A more recent example was the rape of Bosnian Muslim women by Serb paramilitaries. But there is no evidence in 1945 of rape being used as a terror tactic. Stalin, as already mentioned, was well aware of what was happening. But in his remarks to Tito's colleague, Milovan Djilas, who complained about the rape of Yugoslav women including Communists, Stalin revealed that he regarded it as a bit of a joke. 'Let the boys have some fun', was his attitude.

One of the clearest examples which show that the Red Army's behaviour was not a strategy of terror is shown in reports of the political departments. 'When we breed a true feeling of hatred in a soldier', the political department of the 19th Army declared, 'the soldier will not try to have sex with a German woman, because he will be repulsed.' But this inept sophistry serves only to underline the failure of the authorities to face up to the problem.

Ehrenburg's inflammatory articles continued to be published until 12 April, just four days before the operation against Berlin was launched. On 14 April, Georgy Aleksandrov, the Soviet Union's chief ideologist, replied to Ehrenburg's latest article in *Pravda*. In a conspicuously important piece, checked and perhaps even partly dictated by Stalin, he signalled a change in the Party line. Not all Germans were Nazis and war criminals, he stated.

At the front, meanwhile, political departments were clearly uneasy about the situation. They reported how some officers supported Ehrenburg and still believed 'that we should be ruthless with the Germans.' The Party line was, however, clear. 'We are no longer chasing Germans from our country, a situation in which the slogan: "Kill a German whenever you see one", seemed entirely fair. Instead, the time has now come to punish the enemy correctly for all his evil deeds.' Yet even though the political officers quoted Stalin's dictum that 'Hitlers come and go, but Germany and the German state remains', this did not seem to carry much weight with the soldiers. 'Many soldiers asked me', one political officer reported, 'if Ehrenburg still continued to write and they told me that they are looking for his articles in every newspaper that they see.' The change in policy just before the great offensive came far too late for soldiers imbued with the personal and propaganda hatreds of the last three years which had so completely dehumanised their enemy, including civilian victims.

In Berlin, many women found themselves forced to ‘concede’ to one soldier in the hope that he would protect them from others. Magda Wieland, a twenty-four year old actress, was dragged from a cupboard in her apartment just off the Kurfurstendamm. A very young soldier from Central Asia hauled her out. He was so excited at the prospect of a beautiful young blonde, that he suffered from premature ejaculation. By sign language, she offered herself to him as a girl friend if he would protect her from other Russian soldiers, but he went off to boast to his comrades and another soldier raped her brutally in his absence. Downstairs in the cellar, Ellen Goetz, a Jewish friend of Magda’s who had sought shelter there when she escaped from the Lehrterstrasse prison after a heavy bombardment, was also dragged out and raped. When other Germans tried to explain to the Russians that she was Jewish and had been persecuted, they received the retort: ‘Frau ist Frau’. When Red Army troops liberated the Schulstrasse transit camp, which contained the last few hundred Jews in captivity in Berlin, they raped the women without thinking twice. Very few Red Army soldiers, it must be remembered, knew anything about Nazi anti-semitism or the Holocaust. Soviet propaganda never mentioned it. Stalin did not want the Jews to be seen as special victims. In every official report concentration camp prisoners were referred to as ‘former citizens of the USSR, Poland, etc.’ even if the report mentioned that their striped uniforms bore a six-pointed star.

Women soon learned to disappear during the ‘hunting hours’ of the evening. Young daughters were hidden in storage lofts for days on end. Mothers emerged into the street to fetch water only in the early morning when Soviet soldiers were sleeping off the alcohol from the night before. Sometimes the greatest danger came from one mother giving away the hiding place of other girls in a desperate bid to save her own daughter. Older Berliners still remember the screams every night. It was impossible not to hear them because all the windows had been blown in.

Women resorted to any defence tactic that they could think of. Some put on all their underwear, hoping that this might frustrate an attacker. One woman somehow managed to put on seven pairs of knickers. Young girls tried to disguise themselves as old women. Some spotted their face with red marks to make it look as if they had typhus. Others claimed that they had venereal disease even when they did not. But a Red Army soldier who was drunk, was unlikely to be dissuaded. Even less so, if he was already infected himself.

The crime of rape, unlike murder which leaves a corpse, is obviously very hard to quantify, especially in conditions of total chaos and population displacement. Estimates from the two main Berlin hospitals ranged from 95,000 to 130,000 rape victims. At the time in Berlin it is estimated that there were 1.4 million women between the ages of 14 and

50, so even the higher figure of 130,000 still represents less than ten per cent. But many women and girls never made it to a hospital. One doctor deduced that some 10,000 women died as a consequence of rape, mostly from suicide.

The death rate was thought to have been much higher among the 1.4 million estimated rape victims in East Prussia, West Prussia, Pomerania and Silesia, and this certainly appears to be the case from the quantity of examples cited in Soviet reports. Altogether at least two million German women are thought to have been raped. The balance, after adding Berlin to the eastern regions of Germany is made up mainly from Brandenburg, Saxony and Mecklenburg.

German Communists reaching Berlin from Moscow were deeply shaken. Markus Wolf, later the East German spy chief during the Cold War, noted on 30 May in his diary 'Our "frontoviki" - or front-line troops - have exploded in rage. All women raped.' Wolf later told me that these 'very, very shocking events', had gone on for months afterwards.

A substantial minority of these women and girls, if not a majority, appear to have suffered multiple rape. A friend of the writer Ursula von Kardorff and of the famous Soviet spy, Schulze-Boysen, was raped by 'twenty-three soldiers one after the other'. She had to be stitched up in hospital afterwards. Helke Sander in her researches heard of one young woman who was raped 128 times in a single night. Her family apparently kept count.

Even the wives and daughters of German Communists were not spared. In the traditional Communist quarters of Berlin, according to French reports, German Communists emerged to welcome the Red Army and offered their wives and daughters to help with cooking and washing, but political affiliation made little difference. They were mistreated in the same way as other women.

Many of the women interviewed by Helke Sander estimated that sixty to seventy percent of the women that they knew were raped. But this tends to suggest that there were areas in which rape was a frequent occurrence while other pockets of population escaped relatively unscathed. The Swiss journalist Max Schnetzer noted in his diaries that a colleague of his observed that the Soviet troops behaved 'in part like pigs, in part like angels. . . They are like a hailstorm that only destroys part of the crop'.

Much, of course, depended on the discipline maintained by particular commanders. Marshal F.I. Tolbukhin's troops in Bulgaria generally behaved in an exemplary fashion, yet formations in other Balkan countries behaved as badly as those in Germany. Romania and Hungary suffered terribly, largely because they had contributed armies to the invasion of the Soviet Union. But even women in Yugoslavia, an allied

nation, also suffered, with scant respect paid to the fact of whether they were fellow Slavs or even fellow Communists.

In Berlin if anyone attempted to defend a woman against a Soviet attacker it was either a father trying to defend a daughter or a young son, trying to protect his mother. 'The 13-year old Dieter Sahl', neighbours wrote in a letter shortly after the event, 'threw himself with flailing fists at a Russian who was raping his mother in front of him. He did not succeed in anything except getting himself shot.'

But again I would like to emphasize the unpredictability of fate as well as of human nature. The week before last I received a letter from a man who had been a thirteen year old boy in Berlin when the Red Army arrived. There were ten women and ten children sheltering in their house near Wannsee, and when a Soviet soldier forced his way into the house intent on rape, this boy suddenly walked up to him and hugged him. The soldier was so astonished and so deeply affected by this, that he immediately became sentimental, having not seen his own family for so long. All thoughts of rape evaporated and the women were saved. We must also not forget that many Soviet soldiers behaved with genuine kindness to women and children, when they could easily have taken advantage of their power. This, in my view, certainly indicates that not all men are potential rapists.

After the extreme violence in January and February, then the second stage of less sadistic rape in late April, came the third stage. This consisted of women offering themselves to one soldier to save themselves from others, and the post-battle need to survive starvation. Susan Brownmiller rightly noted 'the murky line that divides wartime rape from wartime prostitution'. Soon after the surrender in Berlin, Ursula von Kardorff found all sorts of women prostituting themselves for food or the alternative currency of cigarettes. A Russian-speaking diarist, a former publisher, was approached by a Soviet sailor so young that he should still have been at school. He asked her to find him a clean and decent girl who was of good character and affectionate. He would provide her with food, the usual ration being bread, herring and bacon.

Helke Sander, a German film-maker who researched the subject in great detail, also wrote of 'the grey area of direct force, blackmail, calculation and real affection'. Her term of 'real affection', represents the fourth stage: a strange form of cohabitation in which Red Army officers settled in with German 'occupation wives'. The Soviet authorities were appalled and enraged when a number of Red Army officers, intent on staying with their German lovers, deserted when it was time to return to the Motherland.

Even if the feminist definition of rape purely as an act of violence proves to be simplistic, there is no justification for male complacency. If

anything, the events of 1945 reveal how thin the veneer of civilisation can be when there is little fear of retribution. It also suggests a much darker side to male sexuality than we might care to admit.

Returning to Agranenko's observation about the tendency of the Red Army to indulge in gang-rape rather than 'individual liaisons', as he termed it, it is worth raising the question whether this was a particularly 'Russian' phenomenon or not. Although there are pointers towards the suggestion of a collectivist attitude, they are certainly not conclusive. One researcher, Yuri Polyakov, makes the point that the crime of gang-rape appears to have continued to be significantly more prevalent in the Soviet Union than in any western country. Around the time of the collapse of Communism, the Ministry of Internal Affairs revealed that as many as one quarter of all rape cases in 1988 were gang rapes. But there is little else to identify the crime of gang rape as specifically Russian. It is worth mentioning that in the Japanese Army in the late 1930s and during the Second World War, newly arrived recruits were not allowed to participate in rape. That was reserved for soldiers who had proved themselves. To be allowed to join in the activity of gang rape represented an important rite of passage into acceptance by the warrior group.

But to have some idea of comparison, how did other armies behave in the second world war? First of all the Wehrmacht. The patterns of behaviour between the Wehrmacht and the Red Army do seem to be very different, but that does not mean that Soviet women necessarily suffered less. Front line troops were kept under close supervision, due to the German non-commissioned officer system. The Wehrmacht, on the whole, tended to be far stricter with its front-line troops, not out of pity for the civilian population, but because it feared that soldiers who were drinking, looting or engaged in mass rapes were incapable of combat. This did not of course stop countless incidents of individual rapes taking place, whenever soldiers found an opportunity, especially when they were quartered in Russian villages during the winter.

The phenomenon of what might be termed second line rape was certainly not unique to the Red Army. Field Marshal von Kluge issued an order on 10 September 1941, less than three months after the start of Operation Barbarossa, condemning looting and rape. 'Other base crimes, such as dreadful rapes, likewise occur, especially in areas behind the lines. These shameful deeds betoken to an alarming degree a weakening of discipline, especially among units not engaged in combat.'

But for Soviet women in the occupied territories, the most terrible fate was to be seized off the street and forced into one of some 500 German army brothels. This system was very similar to the Japanese

Army's press-gang of so-called 'comfort women'. For the women involved, it represented nothing less than production-line rape, with the threat of execution if they did not satisfy their 'clients'. And even when the Red Army liberated those who survived from their terrible slavery, they were almost certainly treated as 'German whores' and collaborators. Soviet policy was pitiless, with the question: 'Why were you not with the partisans?' Anybody in such circumstances, according to Stalin's doctrine, should have stabbed a German soldier, even if this meant instant death or torture and execution.

After a steadfast refusal among German women to believe that their menfolk had behaved badly in the Soviet Union, attitudes began to change in the spring of 1945. The remark: 'Well, I don't suppose our men behaved much better over there,' started to be heard in queues for food and street water pumps.

But what of the armies of the western allies in Germany? How did their behavior compare with that of the Red Army? The North African colonial troops of the French Army undoubtedly behaved the worst. In Italy, Marshal Badoglio begged General McFarlane to control Moroccan troops whose 'extreme misconduct' had terrorized Italian civilians. The US Ambassador Kirk demanded an enquiry to see whether 'their removal from Italy is warranted'. The conduct of Moroccan and Algerian troops in Germany was almost certainly far worse.

One can only get a partial impression from the *Journaux de Marche* of the relevant *Prévôté*, the French Military Police, during the second half of April, covering the sack of Stuttgart. For example, the *Prévôté* of the 3e Division d'Infanterie Algerienne, was only twenty strong and did not reach Stuttgart until several days after the assault on the town. Their investigations into complaints of rape appear to have been superficial, as were their efforts to restore order. To show willing, three Algerian soldiers were shot on the spot, but hardly any arrests were made. The *Prévôté* were more interested in preparations for the great 1 May victory parade to be taken by General de Lattre de Tassigny. 'Ceremonie inoubliable. Continuation d'enquetes', was their laconic entry for that day. Perhaps the most striking fact is that they recorded just *two* cases of rape for the whole of the month of April. The officers in charge were far more concerned about desertion. The *Prévôté* responsible for the whole of the French First Army reported a total of fourteen cases of rape. Accounts by citizens of Stuttgart and later Ulm indicate that a truer figure would probably have been at least a hundred times higher.

Rapes by members of the British Army and the US Army were also seriously under-reported, but they clearly were not on a scale comparable to the French and certainly nothing like the Red Army. Berlin women, in another example of their grim humour, referred to American soldiers as the

Russians with the well-ironed trousers. This seemed to imply that although they may not have used force, they shamelessly used persuasion, usually in the form of the 'cigarette currency', rations or chocolate bars.

Helke Sander after all her research, asserted that the British Army was by far the best behaved, yet I have received several letters from former British servicemen saying that many cases of rape, even gang-rape, went unreported. Even so, the British Army was probably the best disciplined due to the NCO system, where corporals and platoon sergeants kept a very close eye on their men. But whether bromide in the tea really made a difference, as some say, I cannot tell.

The effect on rape victims in 1945 is another aspect which has been hard to study except in an almost anecdotal fashion. Added to the pain and humiliation, were the consequences of rape – pregnancy and infection. A very high proportion of rape victims were infected with venereal disease and penicillin was unavailable, except on the black market. As the film *The Third Man* suggested, it was a highly profitable business. One Soviet commandant, replied to a group of Berlin women who came to complain of their treatment, that they had nothing to worry about. 'Our men are all healthy,' he told them. This was very far from the truth, and the Soviet authorities were appalled by the very high rates of venereal infection among their men. In typically Stalinist style, the truth had to be turned on its head. The NKVD and SMERSH claimed that German women, infected with VD, came to seduce Soviet soldiers to sabotage the Red Army. Some reports even asserted that they belonged to the *Werwolf* resistance organisation. There has never been the slightest shred of evidence to support this, yet the myth remains powerful. Soviet veterans today still claim this to be a fact.

The overwhelming majority of women who found themselves pregnant as a result of rape sought abortions. Some estimates put the abortion rate as high as 90%. But hospital abortions were not easy to come by, and some 6,000 women in Berlin died in 1945 from the results of botched attempts. Many of those who did give birth, simply abandoned their child in the hospital, knowing that it would never be accepted at home, especially by a returning husband or fiancé. Many of the children were born with syphilitic sores. Even after an evidently high abortion rate, one researcher has apparently established that 3.7% of children born in Berlin in 1946 were of Soviet parentage. It is a highly emotive issue in Germany today, especially for those aged around 56. A member of the Reuters bureau in Berlin told me that one of his colleagues had only just discovered that his elder brother was born as a result of his mother being raped by a Soviet soldier.

But the main shock, of course, was in the act of rape itself, especially for inexperienced young girls. In many cases, mothers suddenly

realised that they had to start telling young daughters the facts of life as the Red Army approached. For many young girls, the experience affected the whole of the rest of their life. Hannelore Kohl, the wife of Chancellor Helmut Kohl, was raped at the age of twelve as she tried to flee from near Leipzig with her mother. Her recent suicide was widely ascribed in part to the long-term affects of the experience. For many victims, especially protected young girls who had little idea of what was being done to them, the psychological effects were often devastating. With Angelica von Hase, my research assistant in Germany, I met and talked on two occasions with a very interesting woman who had been a young girl at the time. She told us some vivid and horrifying stories of the last few days of fighting in Berlin. Then she recounted how she had killed a Russian soldier who had been trying to rape her mother. She claimed to have garrotted him with the strap of his own sub-machine gun. This was clearly an invention, yet she believed it totally. As we left, Angelica murmured to me: 'She was the one who was raped. Not her mother.' I knew she was right. The fantasy of killing the Russian soldier was almost certainly her way of dealing with what had happened to her in front of her own mother.

Relationships with men became extremely difficult. Mothers were in general far more concerned about their children than themselves, and this priority made them surmount what they had endured. Other women, both young and adult, simply tried to blank out the experience. 'I must repress a lot in order, to some extent, to be able to live,' one woman acknowledged, when refusing to talk about the subject. Those who did not resist and managed to detach themselves from what was happening appear to have suffered much less. Some described it in terms of an 'out-of-body' experience. 'That feeling', wrote one, 'has kept the experience from dominating the rest of my life.'

A robust cynicism of the Berlin variety also seemed to help. 'All in all,' wrote the anonymous diarist on 4 May, 'we are slowly beginning to look upon the whole business of rape with a certain humour, albeit of the grimmer kind.' They noted that the Ivans went for fatter women first of all, which provided a certain *schadenfreude*. Those who had not lost weight were usually the wives of Nazi Party functionaries and others who had profited from privileged positions. She brought back enough water from the pump to wash her sheets. 'My bed now has fresh linen, which was badly needed after all the booted guests.'

Rape had become a collective experience – the diarist noted – and therefore it should be collectively overcome by talking among themselves. Yet their men, when they returned from screening or prison camps, tried to forbid any mention of the subject, even out of their presence. Women discovered that while they had to come to terms with what had happened to them, the men in their lives often made things far worse. Those men who

had witnessed the rape of a wife or daughter were shamed at their inability to protect them. Hanna Gerlitz gave in to two drunk Soviet officers to save both her husband and herself. 'Afterwards', she wrote, 'I had to console my husband and help restore his courage. He cried like a baby.'

Men who returned home, having evaded capture or been released early from prison camps, seem to have frozen emotionally on hearing that their wife or fiancée had been raped in their absence. (Many prisoners who had been in Soviet camps for longer periods also suffered from 'desexualisation' as a result of starvation.) They found the idea of the violation of their women very hard to accept. Ursula von Kardorff heard of a young aristocrat who immediately broke off his engagement when he learned that his fiancée had been raped by five Russian soldiers. The anonymous diarist recounted to her German lover, who turned up unexpectedly, the experiences which the inhabitants of the building had survived. 'You've turned into shameless bitches', he burst out. 'Every one of you. I can't bear to listen to these stories. You've lost all your standards, the whole lot of you!' She then gave him her diary to read, and when he found that she had written about being raped, he stared at her as though she had gone out of her mind. He left a couple of days later, saying that he was off to search for food. She never saw him again.

I have attempted to put forward a number of explanations for the unprecedented sexual violence of the Red Army in 1945. One or two writers have even used the phrase 'sexual holocaust' to describe the phenomenon. I feel that such an extreme term is misleading, even more so than the notion of 'genetic domination'. Genetic domination implies the use of rape as a weapon of race war. This represents a striking contradiction since it leads to the very miscegenation which the racists loathed. On the other hand, I suppose, one must remember that slave-owners, while desperate to protect their own legitimate bloodlines, did not regard the off-spring from the female slaves they raped as their own children, just as more slaves.

Nevertheless, the Red Army's onslaught on Germany cannot be seen as essentially racist in the same way as the Nazi idea of *Rassenkrieg* in 1941. A central – if not the central – issue in the events of 1945 is the way German women victims were completely dehumanised through propaganda. In fact, one cannot do better than to leave the last word on the effects of this terrible conflict to Vasily Grossman. 'The extreme violence of totalitarian systems', he wrote in his great novel, *Life and Fate*, 'proved able to paralyse the human spirit throughout whole continents.'
