

Book Review: Crimes Unspoken: The Rape of German Women at the End of the Second World War by Miriam Gebhardt

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In **Crimes Unspoken: The Rape of German Women at the End of the Second World War**, Miriam Gebhardt presents readers with a detailed and carefully researched account of the extent of sexual violence perpetrated by Allied forces against German women. Recent discussion has focused primarily on assaults committed by Soviet troops, but the author argues that this does not represent the whole picture. Katherine Williams recommends this text to readers interested in twentieth-century history, gender and memory.

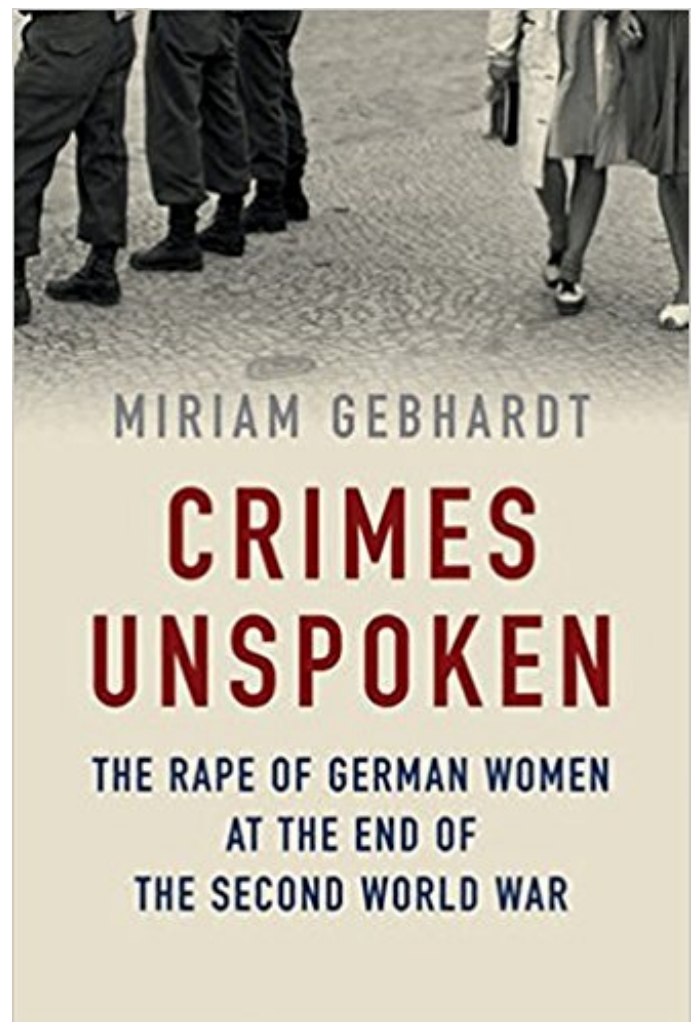
Please be aware that this review contains detailed discussion of acts of sexual violence.

Crimes Unspoken: The Rape of German Women at the End of the Second World War. Miriam Gebhardt. Polity. 2016.

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Miriam Gebhardt opens *Crimes Unspoken: The Rape of German Women at the End of the Second World War* by asking a critical question: is there anything new to say about the topic at hand? Historical studies have told us that over two million women were raped by Soviet troops when the Red Army liberated Berlin in 1945, and some pedantry about numbers aside, it is certainly true that many thousands of women were assaulted by these occupying forces. However, Gebhardt argues that we must reframe our prejudices when confronting the topic, which has hitherto offered a dubious platform for moralists (i.e. 'the Germans got what they deserved') and nationalists (i.e. 'the Russians were entirely to blame').

Critics of attempts to bring the rape of German women by Allied forces into wider discussions of World War II have argued that by recognising the sexual violence, the impact of German aggression during the war is minimised and the horrors of the Holocaust relativised. However, Gebhardt argues that a fundamental motivation behind her research is the fact that many women who were raped in this period between 1945 and 1955 were never formally recognised as victims. This issue is particularly pressing in light of the fact that many of the women are now either dead or reaching the end of their lives. Women raped by Soviet troops, the author argues, were at least afforded some recognition as victims, even if this victimhood was often manipulated to serve ideological ends.



The two main existing accounts of wartime sexual violence in occupied Germany are *A Woman in Berlin* by Anonymous and feminist filmmaker Helke Sander's 1992 documentary, *BeFreier und Befreite (Liberators Take Liberties)*, in which she interviewed women raped by Soviet troops. Sander also released an edited volume with Barbara Johr as a companion to her documentary, *BeFreier und Befreite: Krieg, Vergewaltigungen, Kinder (Liberators Take Liberties: War, Rapes, Children)*. These are valuable historical accounts, but Gebhardt argues that they have in part helped to reinforce the notion that Soviet soldiers were the sole perpetrators of rape during this time. *Crimes Unspoken* aims to unpack these misconceptions and generalisations, and uncovers the degree to which women found themselves further victimised by unsympathetic doctors, social workers and legal authorities. Whilst *Crimes Unspoken* cannot offer a complete overview of events after World War II, it takes an in-depth look into individual cases and their consequences.



Image Credit: US Inf.-Div. in Nürnberg, 20 April 1945 (Wikipedia Public Domain)

Crimes Unspoken is comprised of five principal chapters; due to length, this review can only discuss two of these in depth. Chapter One, 'Seventy Years Too Late', provides readers with vital insight into Gebhardt's methodological approach, and Chapter Three, 'South Germany—Who Will Protect Us From the Americans?', presents us with a case study of the unimaginable violence faced by German women at the hands of US troops.

In Chapter One, Gebhardt argues that we can get a more accurate idea of the occurrence of rapes by looking at the number of 'occupation children': i.e. children fathered by Allied troops. Using figures from the Federal Statistics Office (1956), she combines two approaches: one is based on the assumption that around five per cent of occupation children were fathered through rape. The other is based on the estimate that one in ten rapes ended in pregnancy. There is plenty of scope for error, concedes the author, but she estimates that 68,000 occupation children were born to German women between 1945 and 1955: 55 per cent were fathered by Americans, 15 per cent by the French; 13 per cent by the British; 5 per cent by Soviets; 3 per cent by Belgians; and 10 per cent by other nationalities. According to the mothers themselves, 3,200 of these children were the result of rape; the figures compiled by the American Provost Marshal adds 1,100 children to the total. Thus, Gebhardt calculates the total as 4,300 'rape children': five per cent. The author's estimate of the total rape victims— 860,000 — is by her own admission on the low side, but it presents an analytical challenge to the standard figure of two million rapes purported to have been committed by Soviet troops, according to the calculations of Sander and demographer Gerhard Reichling in the aforementioned collection, *BeFreier und Befreite*.

Men were also victims of rape, but they are absent from Gebhardt's calculations because of the lack of data available. Male rape was often downplayed or was reinterpreted by the victims themselves in order to avoid social stigma. Both boys and adult men were victims. For example, the State Ministry of the Interior notes that on 19 June 1946, two GIs forced two boys to perform oral sex. A document in the Freiburg State Archives notes the case of W.H, who was raped by a Moroccan soldier in 1945. The case only came to light fifteen years after the event when W.H made a claim for compensation subsequently denied by the German authorities because of a lack of evidence, despite W.H having contracted 'third degree syphilis' from the attack.

Research into the topic began too late for oral histories, writes Gebhardt: the interview method would reopen old wounds for the small number of living survivors. There are few official records of rape during the period in question as the Germans had absolutely no leverage when it came to taking legal action against occupying forces. Thus Gebhardt recognises that the archival sources that do exist need to be treated with care: personal testimonies were often written to seek 'exoneration' from accusations of 'fraternisation' and constructed so as to have the best possible chance of being appropriately considered by authorities, particularly when applying for compensation. Gebhardt acknowledges she has come under some criticism for basing her calculations on the reports of victims themselves. Yet, this is reflective of the patriarchal notion that the testimony of rape victims should automatically be doubted in principle, she argues, and further disrespects victims.

When US troops took Munich on 30 April 1945, the widely held conviction was that they would be well-behaved and considerate towards German civilians. In Chapter Three, the author notes that this impression quickly evaporated: the arrival of US soldiers in Upper Bavaria was accompanied at first by widespread looting and destruction, and then rape. According to the Military Prosecutor General, German women were more frequently injured, beaten unconscious, abused more frequently in front of husbands or relatives and more frequently penetrated orally or anally by GIs than by the British or French. Such acts were met with only a moderate degree of indignation, particularly by ecclesiastical authorities. Jakob Engl of Obertaufkirchen wrote: 'women and girls were also raped. Unfortunately the girls themselves were to blame in some cases [...] they [...] smiled at blacks and begged for chocolate until the calamity occurred.' There was also a racialised response to allegations of rape: black GIs faced punishment from their superiors far more often than white peers who had committed the same crime. Ludwig Axenbück, a pastor from Schönau parish, wrote that after 'carousing' with GIs, an evacuated woman was run over by her attackers, leaving her with a pelvis fractured in five places, but at no point seems to consider the notion that the victim was entirely blameless for the attack. There was little sympathy for raped women, particularly those who had interacted with US troops in some, often insignificant, way.

US Lieutenant General Edwin Lee Clarke responded to reports of rape by stating that: 'German women are creating a feeling of great insecurity among our soldiers by untrue charges of rape and that these tactics might be part of a German plan.' After launching an investigation, Lee Clarke refuted this statement; however, physical resistance by victims was the ultimate yardstick by which he measured the legitimacy of rape allegations. The rapes committed by GIs were arguably a demonstration of power directed against a civilian population that had put up an 'unexpectedly fierce' resistance to the advance of US forces, particularly in the Battle of Moosburg. However, Gebhardt notes that we should try not to compartmentalise these events as some kind of gendered 'higher-level battle of the sexes': it is important to recognise the intersections of societal, ethnic, racial, religious and other differences as important categories.

Crimes Unspoken presents a compelling insight into a little explored topic, and deserves a place in wider narratives surrounding World War II. Gebhardt wryly notes that historians speak neatly of 'a gap in the research' when little evidence is found about a topic. However, demands for accountability are not justification enough for the author: there are more important reasons for embarking on such a project, the main one being the demand for fair treatment. The ultimate goal of *Crimes Unspoken* is giving victims the recognition they deserve.

distinction for her MA dissertation on the motivations of women involved in ethno-national liberation movements. Her academic interests include feminist methodologies and political theory, memory and reconciliation politics, and gender in IR. You can follow her on Twitter: [@polygluttony](#). [Read more reviews by Katherine Williams](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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