

The left and rape : why we should all be ashamed of the left's role in covering up the rape of 2 million women.



A blogpost from an ex-Socialist Workers Party (UK) member about the neglect of the topic of rapes that occurred during World War II. TRIGGER WARNING: This content deals with accounts of sexual assault and may be distressing for some people

How I was a rape denier & accepted rape myths

Denial: Twenty odd years ago I picked up a battered old paperback in one of my city's many wonderful second hand bookshops. It was called "*A Woman In Berlin*". Not only was it a personal testimony, in fact a diary, from the Second World War – a pet favourite subject. It was by a woman. And it was set in the Berlin of [Germany's Year Zero](#) (1945).

However, I stopped reading it when it became clear that the main bit of history it dealt with was the rape of two million German women by the Red Army, the Liberators of Europe. I stopped not because I couldn't cope with reading personal accounts of being gang raped (though that would certainly put me off it now).

I stopped reading it *because I didn't want to believe it.*

Perhaps the book was a forgery I told myself – after all, it had been published in the US in the 1950s at the height of McCarthyism, but not since. Surely it was just CIA propaganda? Surely not all men were potential rapists? Surely the Russians were no worse than anyone else?

Cover Up : Years later I was able to give a talk to my SWP branch on the Second World War. I had a lot to say, and went on for over half an hour, though nobody seemed to mind. I had a lot to say about such a complex subject. But I said *nothing* about the mass rapes committed by the Red Army – or for that matter by the Germans in Russia, which were worse, or the Japanese in China and Korea.

12 Million Rapes : "Just a detail in the history of World War II"?

When French wannabe-Fuhrer Jean Marie Le Pen called the murder of 6 million Jewish people a “detail in the history of World War Two”, he was quite rightly condemned, and had to pay a 1.2million franc fine.

Yet the attitude to nearly all historians of world war two towards the mass rapes of up to twelve million women is that it either just a detail, a footnote, or not even worthy of mention. Obviously it’s not just The Left that have a problem with recognising the reality of rape as part of war. Practically none of the many volumes of military history give it as much as a mention.

Martin Gilbert’s “*The Second World War: A Complete History*” completely ignores the experience of the millions of women who were raped.

Winston Churchill’s condensed version of his “*The Second World War*” has plenty to say about the final days of the war in Europe, describing well how military strategy had become dominated by the future rivalry between the USSR and the West. But, apart from alluding to “terrible things” done by the Russians in the East, he says nothing about the mass rapes.

John Erickson’s authoritative and masterful “*The Road to Berlin*” manages just a few lines in 877 pages, describing “an uncontrollable mob intent on pillage and rape” (pg 584) and “Soviet soldiers raped at will” (pg 466)

Russian Rape Apologists – From Stalin to Putin

In the decades that followed the war, politicians acted as rape apologists for the crimes of their soldiers. Stalin was warned in 1945 by German Communists that the rapes were turning the population against them. Stalin fumed: “I will not allow anyone to drag the reputation of the Red Army in the mud.” This has been the attitude of Soviet and Russian politicians ever since. For example, Cornelius Ryan referred to the mass rapes by the Red Army during the battle for Berlin in “*The Last Battle*” in 1966, leading to him being attacked for smears in the Soviet Communist Party daily “*Pravda*”.

In 2003, Antony Beevor’s popular “*Berlin: The Downfall, 1945*” along with Virago Press’s publication in 2005 of “*A Woman In Berlin*” and a 2008 film of the book finally brought the horror faced by German women in 1945 into popular consciousness. The response of the post-Soviet Russian ambassador to London was to condemn the rape allegations as an “act of blasphemy.” ! As with current the current refusal of many [Japanese](#) diplomats to apologise for the sexual enslavement of up to 300,000 Korean women and girls, Russia sees an apology for the behaviour of soldiers 70 years ago as impossible as if its an attack on the military now.

So what about Trotskyist histories of World War Two?

Well sadly, there aren’t many. (Which I always found surprising given the number of political, economic and social struggles & change crammed into six years.) But those from the anti-Stalinist tradition who cover this period ought to feel able to talk about mass rape in wartime, ought to try to explain it within a Marxist understanding of imperialism and women’s oppression, and offer support to all those women seeking truth and justice.

Instead we get total silence, which in my book is little better than the denials and cover up spread by Stalinists, and the inability to take rape and war seriously demonstrated by most “Military Historians”.

Ernest Mandel crams a lot into just 175 pages in his analytical “*The Meaning of the Second World War*”. But he has nothing to say about the Red Army’s rape of two million German women.

Tony Cliff has nothing to say about it in his 1950 “*Class Nature of the Peoples Democracies*” Neither does Chris Harman in “*Bureaucracy and Revolution*”, though he has more than a page on how the Red Army let the nazi’s crush the Warsaw Uprising)

The articles by [Chris Bambery](#) , [Michael Bradley](#) in the *ISJ* have nothing to say. Nor does the *ISJ* debate around Donny Gluckstein’s 2012 “*A People’s History of the Second World War*” (I haven’t got access to this book, so please prove me wrong). In fact five lines in Michael Bradley’s [short review](#) of Beevor’s “*Berlin:Downfall*” is the only mention of the Red Army rapes I could find in all the socialist histories I searched in.

Meanwhile, over at Counterfire, John Rees has produced a good [TV documentary](#) on “history of the second world war told from the perspective of ordinary people”. But these “ordinary people” seem not to include two million rape victims. I’m not able to say if Chris Bambery’s [latest book](#) covers the subject, though Lyndsey German does at least discuss war and rape in her new “How a Century of War Changed the Lives of Women”

Ted Grant, who like Tony Cliff was an observer from afar at the time, did [write](#) about “the domination, plunder and enslavement of the Balkan and Central European peoples”. While he may be partially correct to write about “the admiration and support for the Red Army” and how “the entrance of the Red Army into Eastern Europe provoked a movement among wide strata of the oppressed workers and peasants”, he says nothing about the mass rapes across Eastern Europe and the role that fear would have played in the psychology of those “liberated”.

The only anarchist account I have of the period is a reprint 1948 IWA pamphlet “Bulgaria: Another Spain”. This details the brutality of the Red Army and how it quashed genuine attempts at workers uprisings in 1945. But even though the Red Army raped 100,000s of women across Eastern Europe (though Bulgaria less than others, perhaps because of similar linguistic and ethnic identities), there is not a single mention of rape in this otherwise excellent account.

Finally, if the men writing about the war cannot bring themselves to mention the rapes, can the writers about rape mention the mass rapes of the war? Sadly, no.

Sheila McGregor writing about rape and sexual violence in the *ISJ* in [1989](#) and [2013](#). She has nothing to say about mass rape in war time. Sandra Bloodworth says nothing in her otherwise excellent 1992 article “Rape, Sexual Violence and Capitalism”. While I understand that one of the main points these articles make is that rape happens within relationships and needs to be seen in the context of family structures in class society, I find it staggering that they say nothing about the use of mass rape and sexual abuse by soldiers during wars.

If there are *any* socialist, anarchist or left historians who deal with the mass rapes by the Soviet Army, I apologise. I could find nothing. If somebody can prove me wrong I would be overjoyed. Feeling ashamed of the socialist tradition is not easy. Years of denying that Marxism is “blind” to “women’s issues” and rape in particular are more questionable than ever in the light of the SWP’s rape cover up. But joining in the bourgeois and Stalinist historians in the cover up of millions of rapes is disgraceful. I can’t help thinking that perhaps the inability to deal with the the politics of rape was a factor in some of the appalling attitudes shown by some SWP members [recently](#).

The Red Army, The Left and Rape Myths

“Bolshie Elaine” did a good job at [demolishing](#) some of the rape myths currently circulating around the SWP. Many of these simply perpetuate myths propagated by the dominant ideas of class societies going back thousands of years. Understanding these same myths are useful if we want to explain why the anti-Stalinist left ignored rape and how those on the left with

admiration for the Red Army worked hard to ensure that the women's stories would never be told, that this war crime would be hidden from history, that it would be impossible for "anyone to drag the reputation of the Red Army in the mud."

MYTH ONE: Sexual history with the accused or others is in some way relevant

Many women across Eastern Europe, including the author of "A Woman In Berlin" found themselves seeking "protection" from more powerful officers in the Red Army. "No question about it: I have to find a single wolf to keep away the pack" she writes. "An officer, as high-ranking as possible, a commandant, a general, whatever I can manage" Submitting to one man who could prevent gang-rape by others does not mean that the officer had a right to have sex with the woman. I don't know if these desperate women's experiences are even counted in the rape figures.

MYTH TWO: She didn't complain at the time...

Part of the horror for women in Eastern Europe was the total fear they experienced knowing that their home city was swarming with armed gangs of men who could rape at will with no consequence. There was no one to complain to, though of course women talked to each other. Once "order" was restored, in the queues for ration books and jobs, the women talk about how many times they've been raped and how they will deal with their husbands about it. The fear created lasted long after authority was restored- The Woman In Berlin describes how going out in the evening, she never sees women. In fact the figures for rape come not from the non-existent police, but the abortion clinics and VD clinics, which were overwhelmed with 100,000s of women desperate for abortions. It is also estimated that over 240,000 women died following their ordeal, either by suicide or as a result of the injuries sustained in the extreme violence of the attack. Some women did complain – Eva Shtul, a Soviet prisoner was raped by her countrymen liberating , and then beaten and raped by the officer she complained to.

MYTH THREE: The women were German/Nazi and were just making up anti-Soviet propaganda. It's an attack on socialist politics.

No woman, whatever their political views, deserved to be raped. Furthermore, the Red Army raped Jews, Hungarians, Poles, Romanians, Austrians German communists, Russian prisoners and slave labourers, even those "liberated" from concentration camps.

As for the truth of these women's stories, it is very well documented. Some of these unbearable testimonies are at the end of this piece.

MYTH FOUR: There are two sides to the story

This is where we are supposed to understand the terrible experiences of the average Russian soldier at the hands of the Nazi occupation of the Western USSR. The mass rapes and forcing of women into army brothels, the devastation, the brutality of the war itself. These are often all the Left can say to explain why so many Red Army soldiers became rapists. While understanding the mentality of rapists may be an important part of stamping out all rape, this argument is often presented as some kind of excuse. More right wing commentators on the Red Army's mass rapes focus on "backward", "Asiatic" or peasant attitudes. Such racist views help nobody to understand or prevent rape.

MYTH FIVE: Drink was involved

Usually, the question of whether drink or drugs was involved is directed at the woman as part of a questioning of her ability to remember what happened or understand issues of consent. This time the myth is used as an excuse for the rapists. That there was mass drunkenness amongst the occupiers of the Red Army is no secret. Any alcohol was looted and many

soldiers died, poisoned by industrial alcohol. But since when did socialists justify behaviour by saying “the drink made them do it”?

MYTH SIX: I am not interested in this stuff, the key thing was stopping the Nazis and the Red Army beat Hitler

Regardless of this rape is rape, and a rapist is a rapist. The experiences of rape of millions of women is just as relevant as the experiences of civilian bombing, Dunkirk, RAF fighter pilots reaching for the sky etc. It is a war crime regardless of the failure of [The Nuremberg trials](#) not prosecuting anyone for rape or other sexual violence. Rape was defined as a crime against humanity, but prosecution was not included because such crimes had “no nexus to war.”

So Why did the “anti-Stalinist” Left ignore the mass rape by the Red Army?

Some will say that the best socialist historians of the war don’t accept any of the rape myths outlined above. They may claim that they had no knowledge of what happened precisely because so many have conspired to keep it hidden.

This is not good enough. Why?

Partly, because anybody who can research the details of the life of Soviet workers in the 1940s, or how production was organised, or how political leaders behaved is capable of researching the experience of women. *They chose not to.*

There has always been plenty of evidence about this hidden war crime. Susan Brownmiller details this at length in her classic feminist work on rape “Against Our Will”. This was written in 1975. Did our war writers not ever pick it up?? Before I conclude with some questions for the left, I feel I must repeat some of the evidence that has been around for a long time. This part in particular is disturbing to read.

Popular Memory

There is no way mass rape on the scale carried out by the Red Army cannot be known about by virtually everybody. These were not rapes behind closed doors. They were carried out in front of families, in the rubble, in the streets, and deliberately in front of men. A friend who lived in Berlin, Vienna and other parts of Germany in the 1980s confirmed that what the Red Army had done in 1945 was common knowledge. It was discussed. Memoirs published, films made, stories told and songs sung. When “[Trümmerfrauen](#)”, referring to the “Women of the rubble” who [worked](#) to clear the ruins of Berlin was painted on the Berlin Wall, everyone knew it was a reminder not just of the central role of women in rebuilding Germany after the war, but also the rapes and forced prostitution that so many of these women went through.

Soviet Accounts of Mass Rape

Like most armies, the Red Army was formally opposed to rape and soldiers could be punished for it. Undoubtedly some officers, especially the political officers, attempted to stop it. (Officers were permitted to keep a “campaign wife”, a PPZh, young women who worked at HQ as signallers, clerks, medics etc.) The political department of the 19th Army declared “When we breed a true feeling of hatred in a soldier, the soldier will not try to have sex with a German woman, because he will be repulsed”. But as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a Red Army captain in East Prussia testified at the time, rape and general destruction of German civilians was the norm. he was arrested partly due to his critique of the treatment of civilians. His 1948 poem “Prussian Nights” gives a glimpse of the horror he witnessed.

The little daughter’s on the mattress,
Dead. How many have been on it
A platoon, a company perhaps?
A girl’s been turned into a woman,

A woman turned into a corpse.
It's all come down to simple phrases:
Do not forget! Do not forgive!
Blood for blood! A tooth for a tooth!

[Svetlana Alexievich](#) published a book, *War's Unwomanly Face* (1985) that includes memories by Soviet veterans about their experience in Germany. According to a former army officer,

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We were young, strong, and four years without women. So we tried to catch German women and ... Ten men raped one girl. There were not enough women; the entire population run from the Soviet Army. So we had to take young, twelve or thirteen year-old. If she cried, we put something into her mouth. We thought it was fun. Now I can not understand how I did it. A boy from a good family... But that was me."

A woman telephone operator from the Soviet Army recalled that

"When we occupied every town, we had first three days for looting and ... [rapes]. That was unofficial of course. But after three days one could be court-martialed for doing this. ... I remember one raped German woman laying naked, with hand grenade between her legs. Now I feel shame, but I did not feel shame back then... Do you think it was easy to forgive [the Germans]? We hated to see their clean undamaged white houses. With roses. I wanted them to suffer. I wanted to see their tears. ... Decades had to pass until I started feeling pity for them"

Other accounts and interviews with former Red Army soldiers reveal the attitudes at the time.

More recently, Beevor's "Berlin ;Downfall" notes that veterans today will "admit to hearing of a few excesses, and then dismiss the subject as an inevitable result of war." Others are completely unrepentant. "Two million of our children were born [in Germany]," bragged one tank commander.

Beevor also cites the Soviet leader's retort to a protest by Yugoslav Communist Milovan Djilas about Soviet troops raping Romanian, Croatian and Hungarian women: "Can't he understand it if a soldier has crossed thousands of kilometres through blood and fire and death has fun with a woman or takes some trifle?"

Vasily Grossman, later the well known writer of "Life and Fate" spent the war as a special correspondent for "Red Star", the Red Army newspaper. After the war he admitted to his daughter that the Red Army "changed for the worse as soon as it crossed the Soviet border". He describes

"Horror in the eyes of women and girls.....Horrible things are happening to German women. An educated German whose wife has received 'new visitors' – Red Army soldiers – is explaining with expressive gestures and broken Russian words, that she has already been raped by ten men today.....women's screams are heard from an open window.....The women and girls[left behind] are safe while he [a Jewish officer] is there. When he leaves, they all cry and plead with him to stay. Soviet girls from the camps are suffering a lot now. Tonight, some of them are hiding in our correspondents room. During the night we are woken by screams : one of the correspondents couldn't resist the temptation"

Later, once he reaches Berlin, he describes meeting a Frenchman who says to him "Monsieur. I love your army and that's why it is painful for me to see its attitude to girls and women"

“Now we’re meeting up with German civilians, and our soldiers are making good use of German women.”

“There are plenty of women around, but they don’t understand a word of Russian. But that’s even better because you don’t have to talk them into it. Just aim the Nagan [pistol] and shout, ‘Lie down!’ . . . take care of your business and be off.”

“We’re deep inside East Prussia where we’re chasing after the Prussians so bad the feathers are flying. Our boys have already tried out all the German women.”²⁰

Beevor describes how Georgi Malenkov, one of Stalin’s top henchmen, reveals that Soviet troops arranging huge mass rapes of Russian girls. “I waited for the Red Army for days and nights,” said one, “and now our soldiers treat us worse than the Germans did.”

Eyewitness from Germany

Paul Mattick who’d worked with the IWW (the Wobblies), and the Council Communists (what Lenin called the Left Communists) wrote an [account](#) in 1948 which describes how:

“Children would follow their mothers and sisters, only to see them ordered to bend over and lift their skirts to make ready for love in daylight and collectivity, to be loved by drunken soldiers still able, however, to keep an eye on the rooftops so as not to be killed in the act of copulation. Long afterwards, the smaller of the children would play the newly-learned “game of raping.”

Witnesses from the German Communist Party

Atina Grossmann [records](#) the views of many, including the KPD. As a party, they argued that given the drastic circumstances, women were “owed the right to an abortion”. But their leader Walter Ulbricht was unmoved by pleas for a crackdown on Red Army behaviour and refused to even consider allowing termination of the resulting “The gentlemen doctors should be reminded to exercise a bit of restraint on this matter” he wrote a tens of thousands of women filled the clinics for abortions and STD treatment.

Ordinary Communists pleaded with their leaders that “even the Red Army soldiers, now that the war is already over for eight weeks, absolutely must discipline themselves” Another communist wrote

“Men and women from the working population say to us over and over again : We had so hoped that it would become better, we were so happy the Red Army was coming, and now they are behaving just like the SS and NSAPD always told us they would. We cannot understand this.

Others at the time wrote about what was happening, including Eva Von Sacher-Masoch. Marianne Faithfull’s mother. The long term impact on her family was recently told by Marianne on BBc TV’s “Who do you think you are?” recently. But her mother was also a feminist writer, and ensured the story of the rape of 100,000 Viennese women at the hands of the Red Army made the front page of her magazine in 1945.

Much of the recordings of the memories of the women was done at a much later date. In fact for some, it was the stories of mass rapes by Serbian ethnic cleansers that encouraged German women to tell their story.

In 1995 Helke Sander, published her book “liberators and liberated” in which she interviewed victims and researched archive documents.

“There were a lot of young girls raped. I talked to very many who were then 13, 14 years old and had no idea what happened to them. For many this meant that they later could never sleep

with a man and , abhorrence of the sexual act “developed.” The rapes took place on the streets, in cellars, in homes, where children and other people watched. One of them was raped repeatedly by ten Russians in a row said “It has shaped my life as a woman. I have promised myself to stay alone.”

She later turned this account into a [film](#). She documents the pregnancies, abortions, illegitimate children that resulted, as well as the break down in family relationships, the stigmatization these women experienced, and mental and physical duress these women underwent at the time of the rapes and as treaties were passed between the German and Soviets that never mentioned reparations for the rapes. She also interviews Soviet and German soldiers who admitted to raping women during the war.”

Margot Serowy shows the rape of German women by Russian soldiers in this painting. Serowy was born in East Prussia in 1937 and witnessed the apocalypse that Germany underwent at the end of WW2. She describes the painting thus, “Please take me. A mother’s plea to save her young daughter. Rape was a fact of life among the Russian soldiers. My mother was raped by seven of them right beside me. Children played at rape.”

There are so many accounts from survivors that surely the mass rapes are now undeniable. What we need to do now is explain why it happened. “Having always in the past slightly poo-hooed the idea that most men are potential rapists, I had to come to the conclusion that if there is a lack of army discipline, most men with a weapon, dehumanised by living through two or three years of war, do become potential rapists,” Antony Beevor told The Bookseller.

Rape and War : What the Left needs to explain

Rape has been used as a weapon of dominance for centuries. In Bosnia and Sierra Leone recently. By the European and American slave owners who saw black women as animals, yet saw themselves as having the “[droit de seigneur](#)”. In some tribal wars that saw women captured and taken to the victors territory, and a host of wars and battles for thousands of years. Socialists must be able to explain this. Otherwise we leave the debate to Susan Brownmiller and that strand of feminism that has at least been raising the issue for decades but despairs of changing men or the whole of society.

The left, if its claim to be the “Tribune of the Oppressed” is to be taken seriously also needs to expose this hidden history. In fact the mass rape of women by the Red Army is just one of the unmentioned war crimes from World War Two. It is estimated that up to ten million women were raped in the Soviet Union occupied by Hitler’s war machine, with between 750,000 and 1,000,000 children born to live with the hidden shame of their “fathers”. American soldiers too raped – over 11,000 in WW2, but also in Vietnam. The sexual abuse and rape of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib by the US military, including by female officers, is one of the few well known and discussed cases, and even here, the rapes were barely discussed.

To sum up, those on the left who are serious about looking at ourselves and working out how to rebuild an inclusive left movement, two questions must be answered.

Firstly, we ignored/trivialised/covered up mass rape. Why did we get it so wrong?

Secondly, in war, many many men, perhaps a majority, can become rapists, or at least pretend to look the other way and say nothing. What is our explanation for this and how does it affect our political practice?

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