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Philomela's Legacy: Rape, the Second World War, and the Ethics of Reading

*And that deep torture may be call'd a hell,
When more is felt than one hath power to tell.*
—Shakespeare, "The Rape of Lucrece"

During the last two decades, the German book market has been flooded with publications that highlight the victimization of Germans in the wake of the Second World War. Bill Niven claims that the interest in German suffering "has taken on an obsessive dimension" (8), while Anne Fuchs points out that these works are often presented as a "triumphant recovery of unofficial private memories of the Nazi period" (7). Such increased attention, however, does not imply that these works have lost their controversial character. In particular, stories about the rape of German women by Russian soldiers remain ethical minefields. Told from the perspective of the perpetrator, these stories turn coercion into consent. Told from the perspective of the victim, they are likely to recycle Nazi narratives, according to which the Russians are beasts; the Poles, murderers; and the German soldiers, saviors.

In the following, I will discuss representations of the mass rape of German women during the end of the Second World War when the Russian army advanced West. So far, scholars have focused mostly on filmic representations, in particular on Helke Sander's controversial *Befreier und Befreite*,¹ or honed in on a narrow corpus of texts, such as *Eine Frau in Berlin*. In contrast, I perform a detailed analysis of literary texts and memoirs that have received little or no critical attention. Moreover, unlike previous analyses, I juxtapose texts by Russian and German authors because I believe that a bi-national perspective is best suited to illuminate the ethical complexity and uneven nature of these texts.

As I will show, stories of wartime rape do not fit the categories that define classic narratives of war, and there is no established discourse that does justice to these stories (see Rogoff 265, Dahlke 212). They defy established power structures, they challenge traditional concepts of victimization and agency and of silence and discourse, they are uneven and contradictory, and they are insolubly tied up with the body. Rape is, as Sabine Sielke maintains, "a dense transfer point for relations of

power" (2). When wartime rape is made to serve an ideological agenda, as it often is, the experience of the victim, her trauma and pain, threaten to disappear amidst the noise of justifications, metaphors, and political deployments.

My reading of literary texts and memoirs of rape victims suggests that there is a dilemma inherent to this form of victimization.² Typically, rape, a crime that is strongly associated with shame, is referred to and evoked in quasi-formulaic language, but not narrated extensively. Consequently, narratives of rape are often suspended halfway between silence and discourse. Although many rape victims consider public acknowledgment of the trauma of rape to be therapeutic, they often do not perceive elaborate narrations of rape as conducive to their healing process. But this partial silence, intended to avoid a reinscription of the original trauma, also contributes to a corresponding silence in public discourse.

In order to elucidate the narrative and ethical complexity of rape narratives, I introduce in the first section of the article the historical context and theoretical framework of my analysis. In the second section, I discuss the fiction of "consensual" rape in *Deutschland Tagebuch 1945–46* by the Red Army soldier, Wladimir Gelfand, and contrast Gelfand's account with representations of rape in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Prussian Nights* (1974) and in Lev Kopelev's memoir, *To Be Preserved Forever* (1976). In the third section, I focus on memoirs of German rape victims, in particular on Gabi Köpp's *Warum war ich bloß ein Mädchen*. There, I show that, in these accounts of rape survivors, the trauma and shame of rape obstruct the effort of narration, in such a way that the experience of rape is often elided. I conclude by analyzing the political deployment of rape in Ingo Münch's historical study, *Frau komm! Die Massenvergewaltigungen deutscher Frauen und Mädchen 1944–45*, and the tendency to downplay the suffering of rape victims in works by two female historians. In all these accounts, rape is silenced, denied, or drowned out either because of the shame associated with the experience or because of the political agendas of the authors. Thus, rape becomes invisible even in texts that explicitly address the topic of wartime rape.

I. Rape and Representation

It is an established fact that Russian soldiers raped several hundred thousand German women. Some estimate that as many as two million women were victimized (Jacobs 10, Naimark 133, Sander 5), many of whom were raped multiple times by several soldiers. There was no target demographic. Although children were often, though not always, spared, young girls were not. Nor were old women, pregnant women, nuns, or Holocaust survivors. Frequently, women who refused were beaten brutally or killed while husbands or parents who tried to protect them might be shot. Rapes were committed in private bedrooms, in ditches by the side of the road, and in full view of family members or even entire communities. Many women did not survive the ordeal. Some succumbed to injuries incurred during the rape; some were

killed after the rape; many committed suicide. Some women entered an exclusive relationship with an officer who offered protection in exchange for sexual services. Others tried to hide, pretended to be sick, or cross-dressed to disguise their gender. Some women betrayed others to save themselves. As a consequence of the rapes, many women were pregnant with the child of a Russian soldier, and many more contracted venereal diseases. In theory, rape was punishable by death. In actuality, most rapists acted with impunity.

In their edited collection, *Rape and Representation*, Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver claim that, in narrative, “rape exists as an absence or gap that is both product and source of textual anxiety” (3). This is certainly true, but in the German context these absences are of a peculiar nature. First, given the staggering scale of the rape crimes, the number of narratives is few, indeed. Second, when rape features in victims’ narratives, it tends to be referred to rather than described, evoked rather than presented. Thus, we are not dealing with an absence, but rather with a partial absence. Third, rape is subject to a taboo, but a taboo that is, as Laurel Cohen-Pfister has shown, “repeatedly broken and then reinstated” (318). Consider a story recounted by Kuwert and Eichhorn (9). Here, a rape victim from the Second World War wins an essay prize for a narrative about her traumatic experience. When she is handed the prize, however, she is instructed never to mention “that” (9) again. Clearly, a simple dichotomy of silence versus narration does not adequately describe discourses on rape.³

In the German discourse, the taboo and shame associated with all forms of rape is exacerbated by the politically charged nature of these rapes, since the victims in question were citizens of Nazi Germany. Until recently, many writers on the left adhered to a moral imperative, according to which the knowledge of German crimes against Russians mandated silence about Russian crimes against Germans. It was assumed that any acknowledgment of crimes committed against members of the perpetrator nation ran the risk of relativizing German war crimes and the Holocaust and “indicated tacit approval of the anti-Bolshevik program of the Nazis” (Naimark 3). Even feminists adhered to the party line. In her landmark study of rape, *Against our Will*, Susan Brownmiller proclaims “that a noticeable difference in attitude and behavior toward women existed on the part of the armies of liberation as opposed to the armies of conquest and subjugation in World War II” (64). Here, the victimization of German women is minimized in favor of a narrative of liberation. Such silencing was taken to extremes in the GDR, where any memory of the rape was banished, lest it tarnish the reputation of the Soviet “brothers” (Eichhorn and Kuwert 30, Poutrus 121).

Conversely, on the right end of the political spectrum, the suffering of Germans takes center stage while German crimes recede into the background. Here, the rapes are reinterpreted to signify the violation and rape of the entire German nation. Thus, the question is: how “to address German suffering in light of the suffering caused by Germans or whether German victimhood can even be addressed without simulta-

neously calling into remembrance the millions harmed or killed by Germans” (Cohen-Pfister 321).

It is hardly accidental that the classic victim of rape, Philomela, is violated in two distinct ways: first she is raped, then her tongue is cut out. Philomela, however, does not remain silent but weaves a tapestry that illustrates her experience. The story of Philomela teaches us an important lesson. It shows that the discourse of rape is not simply one of silence, but a complicated transaction where an irresistible desire to express oneself exists alongside different forms of silence, repression, and redeployment. Because rape hinges on the question of consent and thus on “the primacy of psychological states” (Ferguson 99), it is a crime that does not exist without narrative. Consequently, in analyzing the representation of rape, we must attend not only to “the rhetoric of rape” (Sielke 1), to the various silences that undergird these narratives, and to the white noise that hides the silence, but also to the many discourses in which rape is detached from individual suffering and made to perform the work of ideology.⁴ Even amidst a proliferation of texts about rape, the voice of the victim—what Cathy Caruth calls the “voice that cries out from the wound” inflicted on body and mind (3)—may still be missing. Moreover, we must attend to our own discomfort with these stories, to our unease about how these stories defy conventional moral categories, and to the fact that we as readers enjoy the luxury of detachment because, unlike the memoirist, we are not trapped in a body that bears the trauma of this history. As Tanner reminds us, the “reader’s freedom parallels the autonomy of the violator [...] Insofar as the reader’s imagination manipulates the victim’s body as a purely textual entity, the reality of pain and the vulnerability of that body may be obscured by the participation of a reading subject who perpetuates the dynamics of violation” (Tanner 10). If we as readers fail to do justice to the dual challenge of these texts, that is, if we fail to acknowledge either the suffering of the victims or the political complexities and moral quandaries inherent in these stories—we are likely to re-activate the trauma of rape or to replicate the silence that obstructs the representation of rape in the first place.

II. “Consensual Rape”: Wladimir Gelfand’s *Deutschland Tagebuch 1945–46*

While there are only a few stories that focus on German victims of wartime rape, there are even fewer accounts of rape told from the perspective of Red Army soldiers. In spite of the relative absence of first-hand documents, historians have sought to understand the motivations that underlay the orgies of destruction and rape the soldiers performed on the way to Berlin. Many point to the role of alcohol in unleashing violence and also to the fact that the soldiers had been brutalized through the constant exposure to violence and death during four years of war.⁵ Others make mention of the *shtrafniki*, members of punishment units, some of whom had been in prison for political reasons, others for violent crimes. Then there was the impact of German

wealth on Soviet soldiers. Three quarters of the Red Army came from villages, and many had never seen an electric light or been on a train before the war (Merridale 14, 21). To these soldiers, German wealth (or what was left of it) was exotic and came to symbolize the German claim to national superiority even without overt reminders of Nazi racial ideology. Most importantly, perhaps, all these impulses that fostered violence were stoked by relentless propaganda. According to Catherine Merridale, “there is no doubt that the men’s activities were encouraged, if not orchestrated, by Moscow” (312). As the Russians closed in on Germany, many soldiers were exhausted and wished to go home. In response, the political officers intensified their propaganda efforts. Ilya Ehrenburg’s saying, “If you have not killed at least one German a day, you have wasted that day” (Naimark 72), is perhaps the most prominent, but by no means the only example of a propaganda of hate. Exhortations to rouse the Fascist beast from its lair were accompanied by pictures of the horror of Majdanek, the first concentration camp discovered by the Red Army, and sweetened by the prospect of plunder. Finally, Red Army soldiers were acutely aware of their inferior status in the Nazi racial hierarchy. The slogan, “Break with force the racial arrogance of Germanic women! Take them as legitimate spoils of war” (Nawratil 228), attributed to Ilya Ehrenburg, expresses this sense of racial inferiority poignantly. Taken together, these motivations amounted to a volatile mix that led to the rape of hundreds of thousands of women.

In the memoirs of Russian veterans from the Second World War, as well as in NKVD reports of the time, rape simply does not exist (Naimark 85). When Russian veterans do speak about wartime rape, they frequently insist that the women had participated willingly. In ways both subtle and crass, a narrative of violence and coercion is replaced by one of consensual intercourse.⁶ This discursive shift is evident in interviews with Red Army veterans conducted by the German filmmaker Helke Sander. There were no rapes, one veteran suggests. Rather, the women followed their own needs: “Sie haben das aus eigenem Bedürfnis gemacht” (119). Similarly, Ingeborg Jacobs reports that the Red Army veterans she talked to invariably claimed that German women had not resisted for a long time and that some had even lifted their skirts (8). Statements such as these accord with Merridale’s finding that misogyny was rampant in the Red Army,⁷ though it should be pointed out that the Red Army was certainly not the only army afflicted with misogyny (nor were Red Army soldiers the only soldiers guilty of rape).⁸ In *The Fall of Berlin*, Beevor cites a British journalist who reports that the Russians “often raped old women of sixty, seventy or even eighty—much to these grandmothers’ surprise, if not downright delight” (Beevor 31). Bourke reports that American servicemen liked to boast that “German soldiers fought for six years, the German women for only five minutes” (373). The same attitude prevailed among parts of the German population, as evidenced by an issue of the German journal *Der Stern* from 1948 entitled, “Hat die deutsche Frau versagt?” The assumption that underlies this question suggests not only that German women were eager participants in the crimes committed against them, but that the rape constituted a moral failure, a betrayal of their husbands and fathers.

The pattern that transforms coercion into consent also characterizes Wladimir Gelfand's *Deutschland Tagebuch 1945–46*, which was published in Germany and Sweden, but not in Russia. In light of the general dearth of accounts of rape told from the perspective of Russians soldiers, Gelfand's memoir is a highly unusual document, even more so since Gelfand, a native Ukrainian, was of Jewish descent. Gelfand had planned to write a novel based on his notes, but died before he could execute his plan. In its present form, *Deutschland Tagebuch*, a collection of letters and diary entries, is based on Gelfand's extensive literary estate and edited by Elke Scherstjanoi. The book offers vivid descriptions of everyday life on the front and in occupied Berlin. Gelfand discusses battles and party and world politics, but he also dwells on trips to the movies, his amorous designs, personal gripes, and encounters with German civilians.

For the most part, Gelfand's notes, in which sexual violence is largely absent, suggest that we are dealing with a ladies' man, not a rapist. Gelfand portrays himself as a man who does not so much pursue women, as he is pursued by them.⁹ And yet, though cruel violence is absent in his account, coercion is not. Gelfand's amorous gestures are interlaced with intimations of various forms of strong-arming, bullying, and compulsion. Convinced that German women "Zärtlichkeiten nicht ab[lehnen], wie sie ja allgemein nichts ablehnen" (111), Gelfand sees himself as a sheep among wolves, a gentleman who helps damsels in distress. He is the type of soldier who is approached with offers of an exclusive relationship in exchange for protection. But, as such offers suggest, under the dire circumstances of the immediate postwar period, *consent* is a troubled concept. Gelfand is fully aware that both protection and food can be traded for sex and uses his buying power quite consciously. In the following episode, for example, Gelfand proclaims with utter confidence that the proffered victuals should buy him the right to all kinds of intimacy:

Schließlich habe ich auf dem Altar für vertrauensvolle und wohlwollende Beziehungen Lebensmittel, Süßigkeiten und Butter, Wurst und teure deutsche Zigaretten niedergelegt. Bereits die Hälfte wäre genug, um mit Fug und Recht mit der Tochter vor den Augen der Mutter alles Erdenkliche anzustellen [...] Lebensmittel sind heute wertvoller als das Leben. (157)

Where starvation is a real and immediate threat, the line between prostitution and rape is thin, indeed.

While this episode blurs the boundary between prostitution and consensual intercourse, the memoir also contains several explicit references to rape. Curiously, though, what starts out as an account of rape invariably turns into a narrative of consensual sex. In particular, Gelfand relates a bizarre incident during which he and his men take several members of a German women's battalion prisoner. Since there never was a German women's battalion (61), Gelfand is either confusing female army auxiliaries with women soldiers, or he is simply making this up. Gelfand explains that these captured female soldiers are divided into three groups: native

Russians (presumably forced labor), who are shot as traitors; married women; and girls. The last group is then “verteilt”:

Aus der dritten Gruppe wurde die “Beute” über die Häuser und Betten verteilt, und dort wurden einige Tage lang mit ihnen Experimente angestellt, die auf Papier nicht wiederzugeben sind. Die Deutschen hatten Angst; den jüngeren widersetzten sie sich nicht, und sie flehten diese an, daß sie mit ihnen schlafen sollten, um bloß den Schändungen durch die älteren Soldaten zu entgehen. Zu dieser glücklichen Altersgruppe gehörte auch Andropow. Er wählte sich die Allerjüngste und nahm sie mit, um mit ihr zu schlafen. Doch als er sie bedrängte, sein grundlegendes Anliegen zu befriedigen, schüttelte sie den Kopf und flüsterte verschämt: [Das ist nix gut], ich bin doch Jungfrau [...]. Sie weigerte sich noch eine ganze Zeit, bis er die Pistole zog. Da wurde sie still und zog zitternd ihre Gamaschenhose herunter [...]. Da gab er mit einem Nicken zur Pistole den Rat: nur {gut machen} [...]. So arbeiteten sie einmütig und kamen ans Ziel. Er spürte, daß etwas zerriß, das Mädchen schrie auf und stöhnte [...]. Sie konnte sich aber bald zu einem Lächeln zwingen. Er gab ihr Zivilkleidung, ein Kleid zum Anziehen, und sie ging nach draußen zu ihren Leidensgenossinnen, fröhlich und unschuldig. (62)

This account is quite remarkable. What starts out as a clear reference to rape turns into a tryst of young lovers, topped off by the claim that the rape victim left the scene of the crime “fröhlich und unschuldig.” At several points, the narrator alternates between an open acknowledgment of violence and coercion, even of atrocity, and an emphasis on the willing cooperation of the victims. Although Gelfand is aware that the women seek young lovers in order to avoid older men, he still refers to the young men as a “glückliche Altersgruppe.” Similarly, although Gelfand knows that the young woman who is raped by Andropow resists until threatened at gunpoint, he describes the two lovers as acting in unison toward a common goal. Even as he describes the crime of rape, Gelfand erases it.

There is a casualness and irony to Gelfand’s accounts of rape that is deeply troubling. And yet, his diary entries are also uniquely qualified to illustrate the ethical complexities of sexual encounters between Russian soldiers and German women. Note, for example, the following episode in which Gelfand invites a German woman to his room. The woman follows him willingly at first, or so he claims, but has second thoughts and wants to leave. Again, an encounter that appears consensual in the beginning becomes coercive as Gelfand refuses to let her go: “sie wollte nach Hause und versuchte mich zu überreden, sie gehenzulassen. Das konnte ich selbstverständlich nicht tun, denn was wäre ich dann für ein Mann” (186). Finally, the situation reaches an absurd climax when the German woman, munching on food Gelfand has provided her, starts to share her opinions on Jews: “Sie sprach mit Abscheu von den Juden, erklärte mir die Rassentheorie. Faselte von weißem, rotem und blauem Blut” (187). Gelfand, who had not only survived the battle of Stalingrad but lost almost all relatives on his father’s side in the Holocaust, is angered and determined to set her right about the “Obskurantismus stümperhafter faschistischer Theoretiker” (187). When his efforts fail, he decides to resume the political lesson

after “dem, was meiner Vorstellung nach unbedingt passieren musste” (187). Here, sexual violence, fascist ideology, and anger at the arrogance of the “Herrenrasse” (18) are intertwined in a most problematic way. Gelfand astutely withholds narrative closure. We do not know whether that which “unbedingt passieren musste” did, in fact, happen, though we may assume that he did not succeed in convincing his fascist guest/victim of the error of her racist ways. What we do know, however, is that any simple binary of victim and perpetrator fails to capture all facets of Gelfand’s ill-fated seduction/rape.

Although Gelfand repeatedly calls for revenge, he does not portray rape as a form of just retribution. The revenge Gelfand has in mind relates to death in battle, pillage, and plunder. In contrast, in *Prussian Nights*, composed in the Gulag in the 1950s but not published until 1974, Alexander Solzhenitsyn both summons and critiques the assumption that the rape of German women is an adequate response to German crimes in Russia. In *Prussian Nights*, he introduces a narrative voice in the plural, the collective “we” of the advancing Red Army. In the eyes of this “we,” Germany is a feminine fiend, a “foul witch” (3), whose excessive riches make the invasion of Russia even more incomprehensible. The “we” of Solzhenitsyn’s epic poem contrasts with an “I,” who, at least initially, refuses to participate in the orgy of destruction, but who is also unwilling to stop it. The “I” expresses both empathy for the Russian soldiers who burn and kill mercilessly (“we have ourselves to save” [7]) and shock at the crimes they commit. This shock, however, never translates into a willingness to put a halt to the violence: “I’ll be off / Like Pilate when he washed his hands [...] Between us many a cross there stands / Of whitened Russian bones” (19).

The unwillingness to intervene on behalf of the German enemy is particularly pronounced when the “I” is confronted with the victims of rape:

The mother’s wounded, still alive.
 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!
 The mother begs, “Töte mich, Soldat!”
 Her eyes are hazy and bloodshot.
 The dark’s upon her. She can’t see.
 Am I one of theirs? Or whose? ... (37–39)

Here, the sight of rape prompts the “I” to question his loyalties. The line, “Am I one of theirs? Or whose?” refers literally to the blindness of the mother, who does not know whether she is dealing with a Russian or German soldier. But it also signals an uncertainty about the moral obligations demanded of the “I” in light of the crimes he

witnesses. Still, although the “I” experiences a conflict, he remains passive when he is again confronted with rape, in this case the rape of a Polish woman

“I’m not German! I’m not German!
No! I’m—Polish! I’m a Pole! ...”
Grabbing what comes handy, those
Like-minded lads get in and start—
“And, oh, what heart
Could well oppose?” ... (51)

Although this rape victim is not a member of the perpetrator nation, the “I” remains impassive. In contrast, the next scene that includes a threat of rape features the racial arrogance attributed to German women. The narrator describes a proud German woman, the fiancée of a member of the SS and the very image of the blond Aryan, who “looked a little askance at the Untermenschen” (81):

... And then we see
One, blond and magnificent,
Stride erect and quite unshyly
Along the path beside the highway,
Keeping her proud heart unbent [...]
Sergeant Baturin, flower of crime,
Ex-convict who had served his time
In labor camp on the Amur
Strode unspeaking up to her. (77–85)

The blond German escapes the threat of rape, only to be shot when the Russian soldiers discover a letter from her SS-fiancé. Again, the “I” is conflicted about his complicity in a crime that he could have prevented with a mere wave of the hand. What stops him is the memory of how one of the soldiers who shoots the German girl “found the graves of his family,” who had been murdered by German soldiers (87). The “I” is resigned to inaction because he knows that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s trauma” (Caruth 24). Confronted with crimes on both sides, the “I” wonders: “Who knows who’s guilty? Who can tell?” (87).¹⁰

While Solzhenitsyn depicts a narrating “I” who is paralyzed by the moral complexities of war, Lev Kopelev, in his memoir, *To Be Preserved Forever* (1976), describes not only his attempts to prevent rape, but also the consequences that result from it. Because he intervenes on behalf of Germans, Kopelev is charged with “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda” (9), as well as “bourgeois humanism” and “pity for the enemy” (10). His loyalty to the party is questioned, and he is sentenced to spend ten years of his life in Stalin’s labor camps.

Although rape plays a prominent role in the memoir, Kopelev never describes the act of rape, but tends to represent it through metonymy, by portraying the weapons used and the wounds that result from it. Upon entering the city of Neidenburg,

for example, the author comes across a victim of rape: “On a side street, by a garden fence, lay a dead old woman. Her dress was ripped; a telephone receiver reposed between her scrawny thighs. They had apparently tried to ram it into her vagina” (39). Later, Kopelev again conveys the trauma of rape through references to the victim’s wounds and the guilty expression of the perpetrator: “The palms of her hands were scratched and bloody. Belyaev bustled about, avoiding looking at me” (49). Shortly thereafter, he describes a girl with “blond pigtails, a tear-stained face and blood on her stockings” (54). The focus on the visible signs of rape turns our gaze away from the perpetrator and his motivations, and toward the suffering of the victim. Kopelev does not engage in a discussion of the possible justifications of such crimes. Rather, he insists that indiscriminating violence comes back to haunt the perpetrators: “Senseless destruction does more damage to us than to them” (38).

Unlike Gelfand’s diary, where consent and coercion are confused, and unlike Solzhenitsyn’s poem, which highlights a moral dilemma, *To Be Preserved Forever* displays a moral clarity that made Kopelev an outsider in his own nation. To be sure, there is a certain unfairness in the attempt to compare these three texts. Due to his early death, Gelfand never had the opportunity to transform his text into a work of art or to revise it in light of postwar discourses. *Deutschland Tagebuch* is a compilation of letters and notes, not a carefully crafted poem or memoir. And yet, such a comparison is not only necessary in light of the absence of literary texts on the subject of wartime rape, but also highly instructive. In addition to illustrating the impossibility of consent in the struggle for survival in the postwar period, Gelfand directly juxtaposes rape and racism. While Gelfand does not reflect on this juxtaposition, Solzhenitsyn not only develops its ethical complexity, but also points to a danger: as long as the conflicted narrator seeks to do justice to both sides, the suffering of the victims and the motivations of the rapists, he remains condemned to inaction. In his memoir, finally, Kopelev refuses to engage in a discussion of the motivations that lead to rape and thus allows for a moral clarity that facilitates his admirable intervention on behalf of the victims. The question then is: how to read a similar absence of references to the rationale of the perpetrators and to German racism and atrocities in the memoirs of German rape victims?

III. Rape as Gap: Narrative Lacunae in Rape Memoirs

While Gelfand runs the risk of erasing rape in his diary by substituting consent for coercion, the memoirs of German rape victims often feature rape as a narrative lacuna.¹¹ Like their mythical ancestor Philomela, rape victims are silenced by their experience, but this silence takes many different forms. We know that, in some cases, it was all-encompassing. In his memoir, *Das Häuten der Zwiebel*, Günter Grass reports, “mehrmals erlittene Gewalt hatte die Mutter verstummen lassen” (271). Interestingly, Grass replicates his mother’s silence by referring to non-specific “Gewalt,” rather than calling rape by its name. In many other cases, though,

rape victims wish to talk about their traumatic experience, but shy away from describing the act of rape: "Ich habe immer wieder 'darüber' gesprochen, allerdings nie über den Akt an sich, das war unaussprechlich" (Jacobs 47). Most memoirs of wartime rape victims do not contain elaborate descriptions of the violence inflicted on their bodies. They tend to offer little context and to avoid metaphors. Instead of detailed accounts, readers find generic references such as "es geschah, was geschehen musste" (Böddeker 140). The anonymous author of the memoir, *Eine Frau in Berlin*, offers a number of details regarding the rape, but she also deploys a whole arsenal of periphrastic formulations, including: "es mehrfach aushalten müssen" (69), "dran glauben müssen" (134), "es abbekommen" or "abkriegen," and "es hat sie erwischt" (140–49). At times, she uses hyphens or ellipses for the act of rape (57, 62, 178; see Bletzer 701 and Prager 72–73). Similarly, Gabi Köpp, the author of the memoir, *Warum war ich bloß ein Mädchen*, employs the phrase, "Wieder gibt es ... kein Erbarmen" (93).

Indirect expressions also characterize the description of rape in interviews. For example, the women who spoke with Helke Sander employed terms such as "geopfert," "überfallen" (88), "herausgeholt" (92), or "sich einlassen müssen" (94). The women who were interviewed by Jacobs often referred to the rape as being fetched ("geholt") or taken ("genommen") by Russians (22). It is likely that the reluctance to verbalize the bodily experience of rape is rooted in the shame and trauma associated with this particular form of violence. The fact that these women want to talk about rape, but address it primarily through circumlocution, suggests that they do not perceive full verbalization as helpful to their healing process. In addition to these personal considerations, the political implications of wartime rape also reduced the desire of rape victims to narrate their experience. For example, Köpp's hope that her memoir would be published in "einer Zeit, in der den zivilen Opfern des Kriegsendes nicht mehr das Unrecht angetan wird, sie zu Tätern zu stempeln" (12), implies that the author is acutely aware of the controversial nature of German discourse of victimhood.

In her memoir, *Warum war ich bloß ein Mädchen? Das Trauma einer Flucht 1945*, published sixty-five years after the war in 2010, Köpp relates her experiences on the trek West from Schneidemühl, West Prussia. Köpp fled together with her sister, but without her mother, who sent the girls ahead because she believed that an early escape was safer. Unfortunately, this was not case, and Köpp was raped multiple times. When the young Köpp tried to talk to her mother about her experiences, the latter refused to listen, but encouraged her to write about it. Köpp initially followed her mother's advice, but stopped writing when the process of remembering brought on recurring nightmares. Overwhelmed, Köpp locked her notes away in a safe and did not touch them for several decades.

Interestingly, the event that prompted her to open the safe and resume writing was the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, 27 January 2005. Thus, in Köpp's memoir, the Holocaust is not only a frame of reference, but a point of origin. Köpp looks at her notes because she wants to know what she had reported in her

diary on the date of the anniversary. As it turns out, 27 January 1945 is the darkest day of Köpp's life, the day when she was raped multiple times. Clearly, even though Köpp's personal story stands in stark contrast to the history of Europe's persecuted Jews, Köpp constructs it in parallel to their suffering. When Köpp boards a west-bound train on 26 January 1945, she notices showerheads and a sign reading: "Entlausungswagen." Köpp relates that she was unaware of the Holocaust at the time and did not link this experience to the mass murder of Jews until years later. Still, her description of her journey on the train cannot but evoke Holocaust imagery: officials bolt the doors, and the passengers are trapped when the train is bombed. Because Köpp does not develop these parallels, it is unclear whether she intends to compare her trauma to that of Jewish victims or whether the juxtaposition is circumstantial. What is clear, however, is that, in their conception and composition, narratives of the wartime rape of German women are inextricably linked to the German crimes that preceded them and that this link is often presented as a form of shared suffering rather than as a chain of cause and effect.

In Köpp's story, the rape is present as an omission. There are, however, descriptions of the selection process. In particular, Köpp cites the imperative, "Frau, komm," with which Russian soldiers designated their specific victims. She also describes various attempts to hide from the Russians, to duck behind others, to crouch under tables, or to pretend to have a contagious illness. And, of course, Köpp details threats and acts of violence against German rape victims. The rape itself, however, is unmentionable to the point that, several times in Köpp's memoir, the reader does not know whether she was raped or whether she resisted successfully. Instead of a description of the rape, Köpp offers confirmation of the crime through references to tattered clothes and through italicized citations from the original diary that speak to her desolate emotional condition: "*Mir ist schon bald alles egal. Wenn doch irgendwie Schluss wäre*" (70).

In Köpp's memoir, rape and the threats of violence associated with it are by far the most traumatizing experiences. In spite of its overwhelming impact on victims, however, rape is not an isolated trauma, but occurs in a general atmosphere of loss, betrayal, and deprivation. Several times, Köpp teams up with a companion who is killed shortly thereafter. Köpp also relates how she is repeatedly victimized by other women. From the start, her relation to her mother is deeply troubled. Köpp not only feels rebuffed by a mother who does not want to hear about the violence inflicted on her daughter. She also feels abandoned because her mother left her two daughters to fend for themselves: "In gewisser Weise liess sie mich ins offene Messer laufen" (18). We know from similar accounts that Köpp's accusations are well-founded. The fact that she lacked the protection of a parent made Köpp an easy victim, not because her parents could have stopped the Russians, but because her isolation made her a convenient scapegoat when other mothers sought to protect themselves and their own daughters. Thus, when Russian soldiers threatened to shoot everybody if no girls would come forward, one of the women in the shelter promptly dragged the young Köpp out from underneath the table where she was hiding: "Aus eiskaltem Ego-

ismus lieferten sie durch ihren Verrat ein fünfzehnjähriges Mädchen ans Messer. Im vollen Wissen, was sie mir antaten" (79). The ethical and emotional challenges of the time are brought home when we learn later that the woman who betrayed Köpp becomes her closest friend in the group.

Throughout, Köpp interweaves citations from her original diary entries into her narrative. These citations are visually marked through italicization and form part of a dialogue between Köpp, the fifteen-year old diarist, and Köpp, the eighty-year old professor of physics. Since the italicization marks these citations as foreign bodies in the text, readers expect an interplay of immediate experience and retrospective insights. And yet, much that is reported is left uncommented. For example, Köpp relates that the Russians justify their actions with references to German atrocities in their homeland. She continues by stating that she did not believe them because she thought of her father, whom she deemed incapable of such atrocities. No comment from the older Köpp follows to contextualize or relativize this account. Similarly, although Köpp avoids generalizations about Russian soldiers (see Beck-Heppner 141), her descriptions of the Russian rapists, whom she calls "Unmensch[en]" (53) and "Bestien" (74), cannot but echo Nazi jargon, such as the phrase, "bestialische Untermenschen" (Grossman, "Eine Frage" 19).¹² To ask for political correctness from someone so brutally victimized is a tall order. And yet, it is references such as these that have contributed to a silence about the suffering of German rape victims. Because the Nazis had painted the Russians as subhuman beasts, any experiences of German women that appear to confirm these racist stereotypes cannot be integrated into leftist discourses. Here, the call to take full responsibility for the crimes committed by Germans translates into a moral imperative to remain silent about the suffering inflicted on German women.

The absence of retrospective contextualizations and explanations leaves readers in an uncomfortable position. In light of what Köpp experienced, it is hardly surprising that she wonders, "*Sind das denn noch Menschen?*" (64). No reader of Köpp's memoir will fail to be moved by the enormous suffering and the brutality inflicted on the fifteen-year old girl. At the same time, readers are likely to be troubled not only by the absence of acknowledgments of German culpability but also by a discomfort with their own discomfort. After all, the reader's concern with a politically balanced account is afforded by what Tanner calls "the gap between intellectual relativity and physical absoluteness" (xi). Readers can afford to be detached because, unlike the memoirist, they have not experienced the trauma of wartime rape. (To this day, Köpp is plagued by PTSD.) If readers are reluctant to engage in a political critique, it is because their "freedom parallels the autonomy of the violator" (Tanner 10). But before we as readers succumb to silence, we might do well to remember Philomela's story in its entirety. In this myth, the mute victim overcomes the silence imposed on her by weaving a tapestry that depicts her rape. And, as we know, the Latin verb for "weave" is *texere*. However, it is often forgotten that Philomela's creation serves to incite further violence. Philomela gives her tapestry to her sister Procne, who is married to the rapist, Tereus. Responding to this message, Procne kills their son, Itys.

Importantly, the second victim here is not the perpetrator, but an innocent child. The perpetuation of violence in Philomela's story suggests that we should take great care when reading stories of rape. We should not hesitate to critique the ideological blind spots that inform the accounts of victims even if, in formulating such a critique, we are liable to reinhabit the position of the violator.

IV. The Politicization of Rape: Ingo Münch

Rape is not only a crime, but also a powerful trope that lends itself to political appropriation. Indeed, in cases of wartime rape, the translation of sexual into national politics is seamless. In countless myths and stories, the rape of a woman stands metonymically for the conquest of a nation, so that woman's supposed vulnerability is made to signify a weakness in the body politic. Where women are raped, the husbands and fathers who failed to protect them are stripped of their authority and power. As the author of *Eine Frau in Berlin* explains: "Am Ende dieses Krieges steht neben vielen anderen Niederlagen auch die Niederlage der Männer als Geschlecht" (51).

The Nazis were acutely aware of this link and skillfully used it to further their political agenda. Hitler himself repeatedly invoked the specter of rape to encourage fierce resistance: "Ihr Soldaten aus dem Osten wisst zu einem hohen Teil heute bereits selbst, welches Schicksal vor allem den deutschen Frauen, Mädchen und Kindern droht. Während die alten Männer und Kinder ermordet werden, werden Frauen und Mädchen zu Kasernenhuren erniedrigt" (Mühlhauser 366). Such rhetoric reached its climax when the Nazis elevated the atrocities of Nemmersdorf, the first ethnically German village taken by Russian soldiers, into a massacre of mythic proportions. In Günter Grass's *Im Krebsgang*, Nemmersdorf is a code word that evokes the National Socialist instrumentalization of German suffering for the purpose of propaganda.

The politicization of rape narratives did not end with the Nazis, but extends into the present. Ingo Münch's book about the mass rapes is a case in point. Münch, a politician and professor emeritus of constitutional and international law, uses the plight of German women to highlight the immensity of German suffering. Because other national narratives fail in the context of the German crimes and defeat, Münch refers to the rapes to illustrate German victimization. In Münch's "pseudoscience of comparative victimology" (Naimark 7), the suffering of German women is called "beispiellos": "nie zuvor sind in einem einzigen Land und innerhalb eines so kurzen Zeitraums so viele Frauen und Mädchen von fremden Soldaten missbraucht worden wie 1944/45 nach dem Einmarsch der Roten Armee in Deutschland" (Münch 15). Münch's desire to claim first rank in a competition of victims is highly problematic for a number of reasons. First, Münch's assertion that the German rapes are unique is based on his problematic reliance on statistics that remain "colored, to the last, by Goebbels's pen" (Merridale 318). After all, as the author of *Eine Frau in*

Berlin reminds us, who was keeping count? Second, wartime rape occurred in numerous cultures throughout history. During the last two decades, the rape of Muslim women in Bosnia-Herzegovina was widely discussed in Western media, but this too is not an isolated atrocity. Rather, rape and warfare frequently go hand in hand. There were mass rapes in Pakistan, Guatemala, Nanking, Bosnia, Rwanda, Indonesia, Congo, Peru, Liberia, Haiti, Sudan, Myanmar, El Salvador, East Timor, Kuwait, Cambodia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Algeria, Somalia, and Sierra Leone (Frederick 2–3). Rapes were part of almost every major military conflict, including the Thirty-Years' War, the First and Second World Wars,¹³ the Vietnam War, and the Persian Gulf War (Morris 656), though they varied in scope and nature. Wartime rape may be chaotic or systematic, even strategic (Barstow 2). Some armies institute rape camps and impregnation policies. Sometimes, the victims are forcibly abducted and kept in sexual slavery, as were the comfort women of the Japanese army during the Second World War. Other theaters of war involved rape-and-kill practices and forced incest. Of course, the number of victims is crucially important, but so is the suffering of every individual woman. Finally, it should not surprise us that Münch does not dwell on the fact that German women were not the only victims. And yet, we know that forced laborers from Ukraine and Poland, as well as Jewish survivors, were victimized along with German women.

In addition to his specious assertion of German women's exceptional suffering, Münch relies on a problematic dichotomy of victim and perpetrator. In Münch's version of events, victim and perpetrator are mutually exclusive and highly gendered categories. By definition, women and girls are innocent victims who did not participate in Nazi crimes (26). Münch denies women political agency, and in so doing, he establishes the victimization of Germans:¹⁴ "das Volk der Täter [...] Wer diese unzählig oft gebrauchte Formel—inzwischen schon ein Stereotyp—für angemessen und richtig hält, kann sich nicht mit dem Gedanken anfreunden, dass es neben den Tätern eben auch Opfer gab" (26). As Heinemann has shown, this is a discursive maneuver that emerged in the immediate postwar period: "First were memories of female victimhood during the latter part of the war which were generalized into stories of German victimhood" ("The Hour" 355). Because "women's narratives emphasize their sufferings and losses and downplay their contributions to and rewards from the Nazi regime" ("The Hour" 359), they are easily appropriated in the formation of a national identity.¹⁵ As Heinemann points out, such appropriations have traditionally not served women well: "as rape became a powerful metaphor for German victimization, the government declined to recognize real rape by the enemy or occupier as a form of wartime injury deserving compensation" ("The Hour" 372).

Furthermore, Münch maintains that the rape of German women cannot be interpreted as retaliation for the rape of Russian women, since German soldiers did not rape. He argues that German soldiers felt no desire for revenge—after all, their homeland had not been attacked—and thus behaved in a more civilized manner. Finally, Münch, drawing on the trope of the romance of conquest, asserts that German soldiers did not need to rape, because Russian women were drawn to them:

“Allerdings waren nicht alle sexuellen Beziehungen zugleich sexuelle Gewalttaten” (29). As recent research has shown, Münch’s assertion that German soldiers did not rape is simply wrong. Mühlhäuser offers detailed evidence that “sexuelle Gewaltverbrechen keine Ausnahme waren: Deutsche Truppenangehörige zwangen Frauen (und Männer), sich zu entkleiden, unterwarfen sie sexueller Folter und verübten Vergewaltigung, als Einzeltäter oder in der Gruppe” (*Eroberungen* 367). She also reminds us that, wherever starvation is a clear and present threat, consensual sex and prostitution are all but indistinguishable.

Whereas Münch claims that German women, whom he lumps together with children, are collectively innocent, many Russian soldiers were convinced of the opposite. Naimark reminds us that Soviet newspapers portrayed German women as eager Nazis (108). The often-quoted Russian slogan, “Break the racial arrogance of Germanic women with force,” implies the culpability of German women and their support for Nazi ideology, which Münch denies. Moreover, Münch’s focus on retaliatory rape obscures the fact that the revenge that Russian soldiers sought was not necessarily revenge for rape, but for other, non-sexual crimes. After all, 27 million citizens of the Soviet Union lost their lives in this war, two thirds of whom were civilians. As the historian Atina Grossman points out, the image that Russian soldiers evoked in their quest for revenge is not that of a German raping a Russian woman, but that of a German soldier dashing a baby’s head against a wall (“Eine Frage” 20, see also *Anonyma* 146).

While Münch’s revisionist account hypertrophizes rape and denies women agency, Grossman has presented important work that highlights the racism and culpability of German women. Grossman rightly points out that the figure of the Russian rapist reinforced German women’s “preexisting convictions of cultural superiority” (*Jews* 52), but she tends to downplay the suffering of the victims. Although she grants that, in some cases, rape may have been experienced as the worst of many horrible deprivations (*Jews* 52), she also assumes that, because rape had become routine, its sting was not felt as acutely. According to Grossman, women commented on the rapes with “unsentimental directness.” She attributes this “sangfroid” to a “self-preserving sexual cynicism” that originated in “the modernist *Sachlichkeit* of Weimar culture and [...] the loosened mores of the Nazis’ war” (*Jews* 54).

To be sure, Grossman’s point that German racism did not end with the war is well taken. In fact, such racism is plainly visible in the government directives that promoted abortion if a woman was raped by a Russian, but forbade it if the rapist was American (Schmidt-Harzbach 61). Moreover, she correctly points out that rape victims are not immune to such racism. As Mardorossian has shown, “there is no guarantee that being raped makes an individual more sensitive to the workings of the discursive context through which experience is given meaning. Victims are as likely to reproduce rape ‘myths’ as other members of society” (769). Second, Grossman does well to remind us that rape was one of many traumatizing experiences, but it does not follow that multiple sufferings reduce the weight of each individual trauma. In fact, a recent study by Eichhorn and Kuwert suggests that the trauma of rape was

felt more acutely than other forms of brutalization and loss. According to Eichhorn and Kuwert, 74% of the female interviewees who had experienced multiple forms of traumatization during the war list rape as the most traumatic experience (72). More importantly, though, in quantitatively comparing the trauma of rape, one runs the risk of missing the most crucial point: rape accounts do not present a uniform picture, but are riddled with unevenness and inconsistencies. Grossman insightfully claims that *Eine Frau in Berlin* contains passages that are marked by unsentimental directness, but she fails to mention that, alongside these matter-of-fact passages, its author also reports pervasive depression (90), vomiting after the rape (74), feeling disgusted with her own skin (70), and being dead to all feelings (76). Similarly, texts by Margret Boveri and Ruth Andreas-Friedrich contain matter-of-fact references to rape, but they also report numerous suicides (Andreas-Friedrich 23; Boveri 109, 181) and the intense suffering of rape victims (Andreas-Friedrich 176; Boveri 84, 89, 172, 179).

While Grossman's research is largely based on written accounts, the German historian Regina Mühlhäuser draws on interviews with rape survivors. Based on the interviews she conducted between 1995 and 1999, Mühlhäuser concludes that the laconic acceptance of rape that Grossman perceives was not evident in any of these interviews ("Vergewaltigungen" 390). Interestingly, though, she then suggests that the original experience of rape did not necessarily induce feelings of shame.¹⁶ According to Mühlhäuser, the feelings of desperation and shame expressed in the interviews are a later ingredient, added because of the discursive exigencies of the postwar period ("Vergewaltigungen" 390). Again, it is undoubtedly true that memories of rape, like all memories, are shaped by dominant discourses and that such discourses may exacerbate or ameliorate the primary trauma. But to conclude from this premise that there was no desperation and shame involved in the experience of rape is questionable. The fact that the effects of trauma change over time and may even intensify with age does not imply that the initial trauma did not cause suffering (Kuwert and Eichhorn, 36).

V. Conclusion

It should be clear by now that the stories of rape victims are ethically challenging. On the one hand, there is a danger in privileging decontextualized private accounts of rape victims. If we listen to these accounts exclusively, we may indeed "exchange history for emotion" (Cohen-Pfister 327). On the other hand, there is also a price to be paid if we exclude these stories from the canon. The literature of war abounds with descriptions of the trauma of the front, of the physical and psychological wounds of war. As Ann Cahill points out, "as a society, we laud war heroes, listen intently to their suffering (and the sufferings they imposed on others). We do not wish to hear the sufferings of rape victims" (120). And yet, if we are to understand the repercussions of war, then it is vital that every form of wartime victimization enter the

official record and form part of our concepts and imaginations of war. Thus, we should read Philomela's story even if we reject her legacy that entails the perpetuation of violence in the second generation, not least because such stories teach us to question pat dichotomies of victims and perpetrators and of silence and discourse. And as we recognize the dangerous legacy of Philomela's story, we may also remember another rape victim in classic mythology who did not write her story: the beautiful maiden Medusa, who was raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple and then turned into a monster by the goddess, who was enraged over the defilement of her sacred space. Clearly, there is a legacy of violence in both silence and in writing, but there is also an ethics of reading that allows one to pay tribute to the victims' suffering even as one negotiates and recontextualizes their stories.

Notes

¹ There are a number of excellent analyses of rape discourses in films such as *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter* and *BeFreier und Befreite* (see McCormick, Grossmann, Koch, Bos).

² A discussion of feminist discourses on rape would exceed the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that I agree with Seifert that "rape is not an aggressive manifestation of sexuality, but rather a sexual manifestation of aggression" (55) and with Cahill, who states: "it *matters* that sexuality is the medium of the power and violence" inflicted on the victim (27).

³ The anonymous author of *Eine Frau in Berlin* is an excellent example of this dialectic of silence and discourse. On the one hand, she declares that rape victims will have to remain silent about their experience (163). On the other hand, she proclaims that women come to terms with the rapes by talking about them with each other (161).

⁴ In her analysis of why some rapes are more likely to be reported than others, Linda Williams offers another perspective on the question of silence. She concludes that the rape scenario that is most conducive to reporting is characterized by the following factors: rape in public, rape by a stranger, a high degree of force, serious injury, and physical and verbal resistance.

⁵ According to Beevor, sexual repression under Stalin contributed to the excesses in Germany (45). Russian soldiers, unlike the Germans, did not have access to field brothels, nor were they granted home leaves (although officers routinely kept mistresses, so-called "marching field wives").

⁶ According to Bourke, the fantasy of consent is typical of accounts of rape told from the perspective of the perpetrators, whose "recitals of consent [...] and pleasure [...] are attempts by sexual abusers to integrate their actions into a bearable narrative of the self" (14). For investigations of the motives of soldier-rapists, see Price. For an investigation of the structural conditions that facilitate wartime rape, see Morris.

⁷ Merridale quotes from a letter written by a young soldier in 1943: "In the army they regard women like gramophone records ... You play it and play it and then throw it away" (239). See also Reeves Sanday, who reports that "female power and authority is lower in rape-prone societies" (85)

⁸ There were 1,198 documented cases of rape by French soldiers in the city of Stuttgart alone (Lilly xvi). Lilly estimates that "the United Kingdom had slightly less than 2,500 rapes, France more than 3,600, and Germany more than 11,000" by United States soldiers (12). In

France, twenty-one American soldiers were executed for rape (Lilly 107). In Germany, no soldiers were executed for rape (Lilly 159).

⁹ In her afterword, Elke Scherstjanoi assures readers that Gelfand's sexual interests were reciprocated by the German women he approached and claims that the war had led to promiscuity (328).

¹⁰ Pointing to the last lines of the poem, in which the "I" himself engages in rape, Brostrom claims that Solzhenitsyn aims to show that we must "rise above passive distress over barbarism" (241).

¹¹ Like all memoirs, the memoirs of German rape victims are shaped by the discursive environment in which they are written and thus reflect the various phases of discourses on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Even so, the preference for periphrasis characterizes both memoirs of the immediate postwar period and memoirs written in recent decades. However, it should be noted that this similarity may be linked to the fact that these texts are difficult to date because recent memoirs often build on diaries or letters that were written during or immediately after the Second World War.

¹² Sielke underscores the importance of racist rhetoric in the representation of rape in American literature (38). See also Bourke, who points out that the rape of a white woman by a black man was considered "an assault on the entire structure of white power and authority" (105).

¹³ For an analysis of discourses relating to rapes of French women by German soldiers during the First World War, see Harris.

¹⁴ On women as victims and perpetrators in National Socialism, see Herkommer.

¹⁵ When West Germany sought integration into NATO, the mass rapes no longer served a purpose in a newly re-masculinized national narrative, although, as Münch's book shows, discourses of national victimization never disappeared altogether.

¹⁶ In the German version of her article on rape, Grossman also claimed that rape does not lead to feelings of shame, a statement that she omitted in the revised English version of her article ("A Question" 42).

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