

CRIMES COMMITTED BY SOVIET SOLDIERS AGAINST GERMAN CIVILIANS, 1944-1945: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS

Mikkel Dack, University of Waterloo

The study of the widespread violence committed against German civilians by the advancing Russian army at the end of the Second World War has, until recently, been largely ignored by historians. Due to political and social attitudes, including the commonly accepted belief that the Germans were the sole perpetrators of war crimes, this important topic had been relegated to a footnote of scholarly and public attention. In the decades following the war, Soviet writings spoke only of Russian liberation and German guilt while Western historians concentrated on the details of the Holocaust. Of the few scholars who did make mention of Russian crimes, their interest was minimal and as a result this terrible tragedy of the final months of the Second World War has remained largely out of the public eye. The end of the Cold War ushered in a new era of historical analysis, as Soviet and East German archives were opened and scholarly research encouraged. At this time the study of Russian war crimes emerged and was recognized as an important historical topic. Since then, a few key authors, including Norman Naimark, Antony Beevor, and Gisela Bock, have undertaken valuable reassessments, developed constructive arguments, and formulated new questions, questions which have since dominated this study and have encouraged further analysis. The first question is why did these crimes occur? The traditional motive of revenge and the explanation of indoctrination by propaganda have been used to explain the scale

and reported cruelty of these crimes, as have new and more original causal theories, such as a lack of officer discipline and the consequences of sexual suppression. The second question is how the women victims are to be perceived? In this debate, a select group of historians have argued that German women should not be classified wholly as “victims” due to the strong support they gave to the Nazi regime. The final question which has dominated recent study is the more generalized debate of where the blame should fall? In the face of the widespread brutal nature of these crimes, it has proven difficult for academics to maintain a scholarly detachment in their analysis. This has resulted in either a blanket condemnation of the Soviets for these horrendous crimes or a whitewash of their role due to the much more dramatic German war crimes. In the past, historians have struggled to assert their argument while maintaining an unbiased assessment. Despite the increased interest in this subject and these questions since the end of the Cold War, there is much additional analysis to be undertaken on the study of Russian crimes committed against German civilians. These arguments and discussions have only begun to develop and there is still considerable room for further examination and innovative reassessment.

The Eastern Front was the largest and bloodiest campaign in the history of warfare.¹ The outcome of the Second World War was decided not in Normandy or at the Bulge, but on the vast eastern plains of the Ukraine and Russia. Hitler’s unwavering determination to achieve *Lebensraum* led to an intractable war, one in which retreat and surrender were intolerable. Within this context, Wehrmacht soldiers, fuelled by ideological and racial aims and immersed in the most treacherous of conditions, fought

¹ Albert Seaton, *The Russo-German War 1941-45* (New York: Praeger, 1971), p. 586.

a vicious and brutalized war. Crimes and atrocities committed against civilians were commonplace throughout the German offensive. While the infamous *Einsatzgruppen* and *Schutzstaffel* (SS) instigated a program of systematic murder and genocide, regular German troops often committed crimes against civilian populations. Soviet citizens faced not only the traditional wrath of conquerors, but also a regime determined from the onset on enslaving and annihilating the local population. What resulted was a whirlwind of violence and hatred inflicted by German soldiers on innocent civilians. Atrocities were often indiscriminate, in some cases entire towns were burnt to the ground, their inhabitants murdered and women raped.² German treatment of Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) proved just as tragic. The *blitzkrieg* had led to the surrender of millions of Russian soldiers and their internment proved costly to the Nazis rapid drive east. As a result, due to extreme maltreatment and starvation, approximately 3.3 million Soviet prisoners died in German camps on the Eastern Front.³ By the time German forces had reached Moscow and Stalingrad they had left in their path a trail of death and destruction. Villages along the German offensive were devastated and Soviet civilians had become all too familiar with crimes of torture, rape, and murder.

With the German defeat at Stalingrad in February 1943, the war in the east took a dramatic turn. The Soviet army began a full-scale offensive against a tactful German retreat, engaging in major battles at Kursk, Kharkov, and in the Crimea.⁴ As the Red Army pushed further west towards Berlin, they regained much of the territory which had fallen under German occupation two years earlier. The evidence of the atrocities which had been committed against the civilian population was painfully apparent and it

² Tony Le Tissier, *Zhukov at the Oder: The Decisive Battle for Berlin* (Westport: Praeger, 1996), p. 147.

³ Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 83.

⁴ Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (New York: Viking, 2002), p. 10.

resonated deeply within the minds of the Soviet troops. Many soldiers were from these conquered lands and could personally trace such crimes to their own villages and families. In one regiment of nine hundred, 158 soldiers had relatives who had been killed by German soldiers, the families of 56 had been deported, and 445 knew that their homes had been destroyed.⁵ The Soviet troops also liberated Nazi extermination centers such as Auschwitz, Maidanek and Treblinka, as well as numerous POW camps; these too strengthened the desire for vengeance and retribution. In January 1945, the Red Army moved into the German *Altland* and as one soldier recalled, "Things started looking very different".⁶ Prompted by the Soviet propagandist Ilya Ehrenburg, troops were encouraged to "Kill every German!" and embrace the fact that "The Hour of Revenge Has Struck!".⁷

What resulted in these final months of the war was a degree of atrocity and bloodshed which can only be compared to that of the German crimes committed earlier. In East Prussia civilians were routinely rounded up and executed, their houses burnt, and crops and livestock destroyed. As many as 1.5 million incidences of rape are estimated to have occurred during the initial five month occupation of East Prussia alone.⁸ Similar events unfolded in Silesia, Pomerania and Vienna. Torture, looting, rape, and murder became a common occurrence and affected virtually every German citizen who lay in the Red Army's path. When the Wehrmacht's "defense in depth" was breached at the Seelow Heights in late April 1945, nothing stood in the way of Russian troops advancing on Berlin. In the Nazi capital, the Soviet crimes committed against

⁵ Christopher Duffy, *Red Storm on the Reich: The Soviet March on Germany, 1945* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 273.

⁶ Beevor, p. 86.

⁷ Le Tissier, p. 147.

⁸ Beevor, p. 410.

German civilians culminated in one of the most devastating and tragic episodes of human brutality occurring over a limited period. As the Soviets neared the Reichstag the rear echelon troops ravaged the civilian population. With no overall central leadership and few disciplined regiments to safeguard the people, Berlin lay at the mercy of Russian soldiers. Not only were tens of thousands of non-combatant civilians killed, it is also believed that anywhere between 50,000 and 100,000 German women were raped by Soviet soldiers, 10,000 of whom died, mostly by suicide.⁹ Recent sources estimate that a total of two million German women were raped by Soviet soldiers during the final months of the war.¹⁰

Today, historians recognize the Soviet crimes committed against German civilians as some of the most tragic and extreme examples of atrocities in modern warfare and yet the attention this topic has received from the academic community has been minimal, as outlined below. The reasons for such a lack of research and analysis are many, none of which come as a great surprise.

With the surrender of the German forces in early May 1945, the Allied powers descended upon Germany, dividing its territory amongst themselves and establishing military occupation governments. Although both the United States and the Soviet Union hoped to rebuild Germany and implement various aid and development programs, initial occupation was one of strict repression and heavy reparations. Germany had started the war and their portrayal as aggressors, as well as a malicious and sinful people, was strongly promoted. Any sympathetic tendencies directed towards Germany were quickly

⁹ Beevor, p. 410.

¹⁰ Ibid.

struck down as there was no room for compassion for “crimes committed against criminals”. This disparagement towards any opinions indicating sympathy to a German perspective would remain a strong force for more than forty years.

After the war, American and British historians invested their efforts in narrating and later analyzing the battles and conditions of the Western Front, Italy and North Africa, rarely showing interest in the “Great Patriotic War” of the east. The closest Western scholars chose to venture with regards to this “forgotten front”, was in relation to such topics as the strategic bombing of German cities and the Holocaust, both of which overlooked Soviet and German military engagements and their consequences. In Eastern Europe, under Soviet influence, other factors restricted such research as Russian planners found themselves in a peculiar situation. They had arrived in Germany as conquerors, causing much upheaval and suffering, although as the Cold War developed, they sought to regain German trust and rework the people into their own socialist ideology. Germans were educated on the premise that the Soviet soldiers had liberated their country from Nazi oppression and that any wrongdoings were either part of larger struggle to refute fascism or a reasonable retaliation for German crimes committed in the east. As the Cold War progressed and the new superpowers became more committed to their ideological tenets, the history of the crimes committed against German civilians receded from scholarly interest and public awareness. Western scholars chose to ignore and overlook the topic, giving interest only to the Holocaust, while Soviet writers, upholding their political and social dogmas, chose to silence and cloud the truth through propaganda and superficial claims of German guilt. Archives were closed by Soviet authorities, popular culture entrenched political and social

stereotypes, and there was little interest in the academic study of social history; it is no surprise that this significant and tragic topic took so long to emerge on the scholarly scene.

As a result of these conditions, the first writings published about the conditions of the Eastern Front were from German and Russian scholars. Written only in their native languages and confined to strategic and military topics, these initial publications gave no mention of crimes, let alone those committed against German civilians. Historical works were instead limited to topics of strategy, tactics and military engagement. Popular books, which were later published in English and adapted to the American Foreign Military Studies Branch, included Lothar Rendulic's *Army Group South*, Günter Blumentritt's *Effects of Fortification on Strategic Planning* and Georg Guenther Drange's *Small-Unit Tactics*. Although these publications did pose socially minded questions, such as the use of propaganda and the importance of morale, they were still presented within a military construct, never developing such themes or relating them to the tragic conditions of the Eastern Front.

The most notable of publications from this early period was a collaborated works which saw the merger of the war diaries and military handbooks of three Eastern Front German commanders; Erhard Rauss, Hans von Greiffenberg, and Waldemar Erfurth. Although originally released in German, English editions emerged in the 1940s with the intention of educating United States Army officers. In 1995 an English collection was released to the public and given the dramatic title *Fighting in Hell: The German Ordeal on the Eastern Front*. Despite its tedious detail in the depiction of the Soviet invasion of Germany and the "hostile environment" of the front, there is no mention of crimes

committed against civilians or of the misconduct of Soviet soldiers.¹¹ Readers see quite a contrary depiction; "...another determining factor that was introduced into the Red Army by the political commissar – unqualified obedience....systematic training, drill, and the natural inclination of the Russian soldier to uncompromising compliance, are the foundations of this iron obedience".¹² This publication not only fails to mention the war crimes committed against civilian populations, on both sides, but also tends to glorify the image of the Soviet soldier, portraying them only as rightful liberators and competent opponents.

This first generation of writing was typical of the times; popular political and military history combined with Cold War ideologies and so-called "victors rights". However, this limited perception posed a great problem in the public sphere of Soviet-occupied Europe, for although the crimes committed against German civilians by Russian soldiers could be ignored in literature and in the media, it could not be as easily disregarded by the German people themselves. Hundreds of thousands of German women had been raped by Russian soldiers and tens of thousands of civilians had been murdered; the majority of Germans in the east had experienced some form of "Soviet retribution".¹³ No amount of literary censorship or glorified propaganda could erase these painful memories.

On 18 November 1948, Rudolph Herrnstadt, editor of the popular East German magazine *Neues Deutschland*, published an influential article entitled "About 'the

¹¹ Peter Tsouras, *Fighting in Hell: The German Ordeal on the Eastern Front* (London: Greenhill Books, 1995), p. 116.

¹² Tsouras, p. 23.

¹³ Atina Grossman, "A Question of Silence: The Rape of German Women by Occupation Women," *Liberators Take Liberties* (1994), p. 46.

Russians' and about Us".¹⁴ In this editorial, Herrstadt directly criticized German citizens who felt that they had been mistreated or abused by Soviet soldiers during the final months of the war. Rather than speaking of rape directly, Herrstadt chose the metaphor of a German girl who had had her "bike stolen by a Soviet soldier"; however, it is clear that his reference is of a much more serious crime.¹⁵ Herrstadt defended the Russian soldier, explaining the difficult and dangerous task of expelling fascism from Germany, and that Germans, in turn, should "understand" such incidences.¹⁶ Herrstadt's article, quite understandably, aroused angry protest and heated debate among many Germans. The Soviet occupation government quickly recognized these rising hostilities and, in hope of confirming in the eyes of the public their adherence to democratic ideals and openness, arranged a series of discussions which would address the subject of "Soviet-German relations" and the "fate of the German people after the war".¹⁷

It would seem that a public debate on such a significant and emotional topic would result in a valuable discussion along with constructive outcomes; however, this was not the case. The speakers on the panel were all devoted members of the Soviet inspired German Socialist Unity Party (SED). Peter Steiniger, a popular professor at Berlin University, argued that, "it was the German war that turned good Soviet men into wild soldiers"¹⁸ and Alexander Abusch, a German journalist added, "Germans have no right to complain because they did nothing to prevent the war".¹⁹ The discussion

¹⁴ Norman Naimark, "About 'the Russian' and About Us – the Question of Rape and Soviet-German Relations in the East Zone," (unpublished paper) *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (1995), p. 135.

¹⁵ Naimark, p. 136.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 136.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 137.

concluded with a brief question and answer period. A young woman, once again using the metaphor of having her “bike stolen”, spoke of her experiences after the war. The question she posed to the Panel was; what can help us overcome this disturbed relationship, that is, this fear? Herrnstadt and the other Panel members quickly dismissed her inquiry, reverting back to their more rehearsed rhetoric of German guilt and Soviet liberation.²⁰

Although these discussions in Berlin ended that evening, many more were organized throughout the Soviet Zone in the months that followed.²¹ However, never again would topics of rape and Russian crimes be mentioned; in the minds of the Soviet planners these issues were now closed for discussion. The “Herrnstadt Debates” had confirmed what the literature had already claimed, that there was no room in East German or Soviet history for such events, that these crimes were to be ignored, forgotten and repressed. After these initial publications and discussions in the late 1940s, came a long and stagnant period, one which saw little mention of German sufferings in the Second World War and of the crimes committed by Russian soldiers. Not until the early 1970s would West German and American scholars revisit these topics and challenge such well-established historical traditions.

Western scholarly interest in the Eastern Front and in German-Soviet relations was slow to develop. Early English publications were rare and covered only broad themes of warfare and military strategy. In the 1970s, as social historians began to emerge in the professional arena and their interests began to stretch beyond their own country’s national experiences of the Second World War, the brutal offensive drive of

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 139.

the Red Army on the Eastern Front and the crimes committed against German civilians began to attract scholarly attention. These crimes, mentioned only briefly and in select publications, slowly made their way into the pages of popular historical literature. John Strawson's 1974 book *The Battle for Berlin* demonstrates this emerging shift in western scholarly acknowledgement. Written in a "traditional style", one of strategic detail and political emphasis, Strawson spends considerable time describing the character of the Eastern Front along with a meticulous account of its military engagements. Only when attempting to convey the public sentiments in Berlin during the final days of the battle does he allude to Soviet crimes; "...except for those members of the Red Army left to exact revenge for Leningrad and Kharkov or some other atrocities committed by the Nazis, there was little to recommend in the conduct of battle...the population lived in fear that they would fall into Soviet hands".²² This implied reference to Soviet atrocities can be seen in other texts of the period, such as in Albert Seaton's *The Russo-German War 1941-1945* and Erich Kuby's *The Russians and Berlin, 1945*. These works concentrate on the military aspects of the Soviet offensive and although they give mention of Russian hostility and a sense of German fear, the crimes themselves are not affirmed or described in any detail.

Gordon Craig, the renowned American historian and former president of the *American Historical Association*, further advanced this growing interest in the Soviet crimes committed against German civilians. In his best-selling book *The Germans*, Craig sets out to explain the "historical journey" that the German people have embarked upon during the past two hundred years. Interestingly enough, Craig spends little time on the events of the Third Reich and the Second World War, although, he is still unable

²² Strawson, p. 139.

to ignore such topics as the Eastern Front and the Holocaust and it is within these sections that we see the mention of Soviet crimes, writing how Soviet soldiers "...alienated [the German people] by their misconduct".²³ In his 1987 article "*The War of the German Historians*", Craig again mentions the various crimes committed against German civilians in the final battles of the war. Craig should be recognized as one of the first historians to make mention of the Soviet crimes committed against civilians. Although limited in its description, it still stands as a large step in a movement towards a more collective and reasonable depiction of war crimes on the Eastern Front.

Another prominent historian who challenged such taboos and helped advance the study of this disregarded topic was Andreas Hillgruber. The West German writer made significant contributions in the study of social and cultural history and is often referred to as the foremost Third Reich historian of his time. Hillgruber's definitive work, *Germany and the Two World Wars*, also makes reference to the rape and murder of Germans, however, in his later text we see a more significant mention of these crimes. In his 1986 book entitled *Zweierlei Untergang: Die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums*, Hillgruber highlights the sufferings of civilians in eastern Germany at the end of the war. He documents incidences such as the "gang-raping" of German women and girls, the widespread looting of stores and homes, and the horrible massacres of German civilians by the Soviet army. Hillgruber gives gruesome detail in his depiction of these crimes, describing them as an "orgy of revenge".²⁴

²³ Gordon Craig, *The Germans* (New York: Putnam Sons, 1981), p. 280.

²⁴ Andreas Hillgruber, *Germany and the Two World Wars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 36.

These Western writings which were published in the late Cold War saw the slow and gradual mention of the Soviet war crimes committed against Germans. At first these atrocities were only alluded to, making reference to civilian fears and a Soviet desire for retribution. Soon after the crimes themselves were identified, incidences of rape and murder being acknowledged. Finally, we see a detailed account of these crimes, giving specific examples and generating a more personal depiction of the victims. The point that must be made is that although this evolving awareness did advance the study of the topic, it was limited only to a small number of historians and was far from being part of a popular trend. Individuals like Strawson, Craig and Hillgruber, despite their established reputations, were among the few writers who gave any mention of these crimes. The majority of the literature on the Eastern Front and the German perspective was still dominated by military and strategic topics and any mention of war crimes or civilian sufferings tended to fall within the realm of the Jewish Holocaust. The study of Russian crimes committed against German civilians was still restricted by the same factors that had been established at the end of the war: Soviet and GDR archives remained closed, historical interests continued to rest on the Western Front, and German sympathy was still viewed with a critical and suspicious eye.

When the Berlin Wall was brought down in 1989-1990, so was the shadow that had been cast over the archives of Eastern Europe for more than forty years. Scholars from the United States, Britain, Germany, and Russia all rushed to take advantage of this vast untapped historical resource. Historians, now with the documents and sources to facilitate their research, began to reevaluate and uncover the details of the final

months of the Second World War and the military occupation of eastern Germany. However, there were still many obstacles which stood in the way of these eager historians and socially-minded writers, as the Russian archives which had been opened for private scholarly study bore many limitations. Language restrictions slowed research as did the often uncooperative Russian administration; however, the most substantial drawback was the state of the archives themselves. Even though many documents had been made available, the Russian archival system proved considerably complex and difficult to understand.²⁵ There was no clear or orderly filing system and historians found it extremely difficult to locate relevant documents.

Despite such obstacles, many historians benefited significantly from these newly released sources. As the taboo against showing sympathy to the Germans weakened, with the popular rise of social history amongst academics, and with the saturation of Holocaust literature, the stage was set for the in-depth study of the Soviet war crimes which had been committed against German civilians. The 1990s saw an explosion of literature on the topic of German-Soviet relations, including the conditions of the Eastern Front and the atrocities which accompanied it. Throughout the last fifteen years a new and valuable historiography has emerged, one which has produced substantial scholarly study and has posed new questions with regards to this topic. In the past, this discussion had been centered on the simple acknowledgment of Soviet war crimes, occasionally asking the question: did the Germans deserve it? (This of course was almost always responded with a unanimous 'yes'). However, with this new influx of scholarly works, three new questions have come to dominate the debate on this topic:

²⁵ Rolf-Dieter Müller and Gerd R. Ueberschar, trans., *Hitler's War in the East 1941-1945, Critical Assessment* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1997), p. vii.

Why did these crimes occur? How are the victims of rape to be perceived? And, where does the blame fall? It seems that these three questions lie at the center of the study of Soviet war crimes and it is in the context of their debate that this topic has become a more popular subject for scholarly study.

Before I outline the constructs of these central questions, I must first acknowledge three key publications, for it is with these particular works that the awareness of Soviet war crimes and German civilian sufferings have been fully appreciated. All three authors embodied this new generation of post-Cold War archivists and socially conscious historians. The first is Omer Bartov's work *The Eastern Front, 1941-45: German Troops and the Barbarization of Warfare*. Drawing mostly from the archival sources of specific combat formations and the journals of German soldiers, Bartov gives a detailed account of the grueling conditions of the Eastern Front and the "brutalized" nature of warfare which facilitated the many atrocities and crimes inflicted by occupation soldiers. Although he does not ignore the political and military aspects of the front, Bartov's work concentrates on the psychological state of the individual soldier, examining morale, fear, racial ideology, and the impacts of propaganda. Bartov's book is a study of the German army on the Eastern Front and therefore gives little mention of Soviet war crimes, however, he does establish the context and framework upon which future analysis would be built.

The second notable publication which has helped advance this study is Norman Naimark's book *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949*. Naimark's ability to read both German and Russian is reflected in this well

researched and penetrating analysis of Soviet occupation; it is no wonder that his work is among the most cited on this subject. Although Gordon Craig was one of the first historians to mention such crimes, Naimark was the first to spend considerable time describing the many incidences of rape and murder. In his analysis he covers the entire Russian occupation period (1945-1949), however, the majority of his book portrays the initial six months, dedicating an entire chapter to the study of "Soviet Soldiers, German Women and the Problem of Rape".²⁶ Naimark gives a detailed account of Soviet atrocities, including numerous instances taken from diaries and letters, as well as a comprehensive depiction, placing these crimes within the greater context of political, ideological and military history. Norman Naimark's book was the first publication of its kind and has since acted as a work of constant reference and academic regulation.

The final publication which deserves distinct recognition is Antony Beevor's *The Fall of Berlin*. Published seven years after Naimark's work, Beevor's depiction of the final weeks of the war aroused great interest, reflected in high book sales. Although Beevor concentrates on the Battle of Berlin, he places it within the context of the final two months of the war, including details of the battles fought in East Prussia, the Seelow Heights, and at the Oder Bridgehead. He highlights not only the various strategic and military aspects of these battles, but also the social and psychological elements involved. In a very descriptive and emotional writing style, Beevor sympathizes with the German people who were victims of Russian aggression. He recounts personal stories of rape and murder, refusing to censor the horrible and often gruesome details of such crimes. Beevor's book stirred great controversy in Russia after its publication, as it was

²⁶ Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 69.

accused of having over-exaggerated such crimes and presenting the Soviet soldier as “drunken, out of control and sexually repressed”.²⁷ Despite such criticism, Beevor’s emotional depiction of the crimes committed against German civilians drew much public attention and brought this topic to the forefront of historical interpretation. The accuracy of his writing has been challenged; however, it has provoked further analysis and has instigated scholarly debate.

These three notable publications have acted as a framework from which this recently revived historical topic has grown. Either through creating an accurate context from which to understand these crimes, by introducing new archival information and challenging decades of traditional scholarly writing, or by bringing details to public light, all scholarly works and subsequent debates of the past fifteen years have been largely influenced by these three sources.

During the Soviet occupation of Germany in the late 1940s, Russian war crimes were scarcely discussed and rarely questioned. The few questions that were raised brought only dim light to the topic and searched only for acknowledgement that the atrocities had actually occurred. However, with the emergence of a new generation of scholarly writing and the revival of this historical topic, a new set of questions has been postulated, the first of which proves to be the most diverse and complex of them all; why did the Russians behave so savagely in Germany in 1945? Although the answer might seem simple, recent scholarly works have produced numerous responses to this question, along with various debates regarding the degree of application.

²⁷ James Mark, “Remembering Rape: Divided Social Memory and the Red Army in Hungary 1944-1945,” *Past & Present* 188 (2005): p. 134.

Revenge and the act of retribution has been the most popular answer to this first question, as nearly every relevant written work and publication mentions this motivation. Early Soviet propagandists highlighted this aspect of revenge as did works by Gordon Craig and Andreas Hillgruber. The British historian Christopher Duffy, in his book *Red Storm on the Reich*, explains this “cycle of revenge”. He argues that Soviet soldiers were personally affected by the German atrocities in the east, as many of their own villages and families had been the victims of such crimes.²⁸ He also makes reference to the hundreds of thousands of Russian POWs who, after being liberated by their fellow Soviets, joined in the offensive against Germany.²⁹ Norman Naimark adds to this popular argument, noting that observing officers encouraged such emotions of revenge. In January 1945, Marshal Zhukov, high commander of the Red Army, proclaimed to his troops on the Belorussian Front, “Woe to the land of the murderers, we will get our terrible revenge”.³⁰

Many German scholars have also suggested this motivating force of Russian retaliation. In both Rolf-Dieter Müller’s *Hitler’s War in the East: A Critical Reassessment* and Ingrid Schmidt-Harzbach’s *Eine Woche im April, 1945*, distinct comparisons are made between the German and Russian occupations, including crimes committed against civilian populations. Müller contends that the common Russian soldier had been witness to the German crimes in the east and that when they, in turn, reached German soil they intended to “return the favor”.³¹

²⁸ Duffy, p. 273.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

³⁰ Naimark, p. 72.

³¹ Müller, p. 283.

Although the majority of current historians agree that revenge played a significant role in the atrocities, there has been some debate over the degree to which these emotions influenced the actions of Russian soldiers. Antony Beevor argues that although many Russians did feel the need to inflict similar pain and suffering on the Germans, this was not the driving force behind such crimes. Instead he argues that the majority of soldiers were trained not to keep a so-called “book of revenge”.³² He makes the point that Soviet officers organized regular meetings in order to discuss topics such as the “the honor and dignity of the Red Army warrior” and how to “correctly understand the problem of taking revenge”.³³ In his analysis, Beevor does not overlook the possible fallacy of these orders; however, his work does create a plausible argument from which to challenge the established belief that the “revenge factor” was the essential impetus in the Russian crimes committed against civilians.

Ideological indoctrination and the implementation of Soviet propaganda stands as another popular means by which historians have approached the study of Russian crimes. Similar to motivations of revenge and retribution, the role of propaganda has also been widely accepted in scholarly works, again with some emphasizing its influence more than others. Norman Naimark, who underlines the psychological aspects of warfare, writes on the Jewish-Soviet propagandist Ilya Ehrenburg and his “chants of ritual hatred for the Germans”.³⁴ Christopher Duffy furthers this account, claiming that Ehrenberg and the Soviet propaganda machine infiltrated the minds of the Russian soldier in every way possible; putting up posters in villages and alongside roads, dropping leaflets from planes, circulating newspapers, and broadcasting radio

³² Naimark, p. 72.

³³ Beevor, p. 327.

³⁴ Naimark, p. 72.

transmissions.³⁵ In one of Ehrenberg's leaflets he writes; "Now we understand the Germans are not human...let us kill. If you do not kill a German, a German will kill you. He will carry away your family, and torture them in his damned Germany. If you have killed one German, kill another".³⁶

The renowned military historian Tony Le Tissier emphasizes, much more than other scholars, this role of propaganda in both his 1996 book *Zhukov at the Oder*, as well as his more recent work *With Our Backs to Berlin*. He highlights the enthusiastic response that the "primitive peasant soldier" gave to Soviet propaganda and how it fuelled an already established hatred for their enemy. However, Le Tissier also contends that these programs of indoctrination were not simply established to encourage hatred and aggression towards the German people, but also to instill confidence in the Russian soldier and to discourage German resistance.³⁷ Le Tissier confesses that these programs did result in the murder and rape of thousands of Germans, but that such atrocities were never orchestrated or desired by Soviet planners, at least not during the final months of the war.³⁸ In light of this point, it would seem that there is still work to be done with regards to the study of Soviet propaganda and its role as a motivator for Russian crimes.

In more recent years, a number of new perspectives have begun to formulate, some of which are of great value and should have substantial influence on the future study of Russian war crimes and in understanding the motivations behind such

³⁵ Duffy, p. 274.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Le Tissier, p. 147.

³⁸ During the final stages of the war, once Russian victory was apparent, Soviet planners and propagandists began to shift their resources away from a program of "winning the war at all costs" and looked more at the necessary tools and actions needed to accommodate future occupation. For more on this shift in policy see Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War, 1941-1945* (London: Hodder Education, 2005).

atrocities. One such argument is the role that Soviet officers played in the crimes against civilians. Le Tissier explains that the Red Army relied solely on their officer corps to maintain discipline, rather than on the “Non-Commissioned Officers backbone” found in most other national armies.³⁹ He argues that due to this system of remote authority, Soviet officers were unable to sustain obedience among their soldiers, leading to widespread acts of looting, rape and murder. Beevor also examines the impact that officers had on the crimes committed against civilians; however, he emphasizes a very different point. Beevor contends that the majority of Soviet officers, not only lacked authority over their troops, but also participated in the acts of violence and mistreatment of German civilians themselves. He argues that maintaining discipline through political exhortation was “doomed to failure” and therefore many officers submitted to such crimes, often mailing looted valuables back to their families in Russia and entertaining a German “mistress”.⁴⁰ However, Beevor’s depiction of Soviet officers has been recently challenged in new works such as James Mark’s *Remembering Rape: Divided Social Memory and the Red Army in Hungary, 1944-1945*. Drawing exclusively from personal interviews, Mark highlights various incidences in which “friendly” Soviet officers were encountered. He also explains that many civilians experienced no maltreatment from Soviet soldiers whatsoever and that a “Russian fear” was not as widespread as Beevor has suggested.⁴¹ As Mark concentrates his studies on the Soviet crimes committed in Hungary and Romania, a closer analysis of the German experiences of Soviet officer discipline has yet to be undertaken.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

⁴⁰ Beevor, p. 29.

⁴¹ Mark, p. 136.

Another perspective which has developed in recent years involves the influences of sexuality, an interpretation which has been confined to the studies of Antony Beevor. In this unique and somewhat unusual line of reasoning, Beevor depicts the Russian soldier as an individual driven by primitive male sexuality. He argues that incidences of rape were not necessarily committed out of hatred or revenge, but instead soldiers treated women in Germany as “sexual spoils of war”.⁴² Beevor points out that the majority of rapists did not demonstrate gratuitous violence towards their victims; instead it seems that they were satisfying only a sexual desire and a psychological need to assert their dominance. He concludes that these trends suggest that there is a “dark area of male sexuality which can emerge all too easily, especially in war, when there are no social and disciplinary restraints”.⁴³ Beevor ties his study of sexual influences to the ideological beliefs of communism. He argues that sexual freedom was subject for lively debate within Communist Party circles during the 1920s and that Stalin ensured that Soviet society depicted itself as virtually asexual.⁴⁴ This new doctrine led to the complete suppression of sexual education as well as forms of public affection. Beevor therefore argues that most ill-educated Red Army soldiers suffered from sexual ignorance and possessed “unenlightened attitudes towards women”.⁴⁵ This sexual perspective to the question of why Russian soldiers committed crimes against civilians is a confined study and has yet to attract further scholarly interest. However, there has been considerable work produced in recent years on more general topics, such as the

⁴² Beevor, p. 28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

sexual practices of wartime soldiers and the psychological aspects of masculinity in the military.⁴⁶

The second question which has dominated the recent study of Russian crimes has resulted in a more distinct argument. It revolves around the subject of rape and of the women who endured such crimes in Berlin and in other parts of eastern Germany. Although the utter ferocity and degrading nature of this crime is not contested, there has been considerable scholarly debate as to how the German women who fell victim to such crimes are to be portrayed in historical writings. The question asked is to what degree German women should be depicted as “victims” given their devout support of the Nazi government. Were they purely innocent bystanders who were ravaged by a foreign enemy or were they in truth such strong Nazis supporters that they shared the collective German guilt? Both of these arguments hold some truth, crimes such as rape produce definite victims and the majority of German women were also supporters of the Nazi regime. The scholarly debate which has developed does not suggest that only a single depiction is necessary, instead it seeks to determine which is of greater importance.

Initial debate on the perception of rape and of its victims began in the 1980s, revolving around the work of two prominent historians; Gisela Bock, a feminist historian from the Freie Universität in Berlin and Claudia Koonz, a historian of Nazi Germany from Duke University in the United States. In this *Historikerinnenstreit*⁴⁷ (Women Historians’ Dispute), as it would later be called, Bock professes to the belief that above

⁴⁶ Some such works include: Joseph Lunn, ‘Male Identity and Martial Codes of Honor: A Comparison of the War Memoirs of Robert Graves, Ernst Jünger, and Kande Kamara’, in *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (July 2005), pp. 713-735 and Annette Timm, ‘Sex with a Purpose: Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and Militarized Masculinity in the Third Reich’, in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 11, No. 1/2 (Jan.-Apr. 2002), pp. 223-255.

⁴⁷ Stuart Liebman, “After the Fall: Women in the House of the Hangman,” *Liberators Take Liberties* (1994): p. 7.

all German women were *Opfer* (victims) while Koonz argues they were foremost *Täter* (perpetrators). In "*Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization and the State*", Bock argues that all German women in the Third Reich were victims of both racism and sexism, regardless of their roles as perpetrators.⁴⁸ She maintains that the physical and psychological attacks which were inflicted on women of the Third Reich takes precedence and that other factors, including ideological beliefs or possible remnants of guilt, are of little importance. Koonz disagrees with Bock's assessment of rape and on the degree of popular support women had for the Nazis. She argues that although the crimes committed against German women were atrocious and that no degree of collaboration could make them excusable, they cannot be displaced from the other crimes which occurred at the end of the war. In her book *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics*, Koonz argues that German women were devoted followers of the Nazi regime and that they were just as much perpetrators as were German men. She states that in order to accurately depict the atrocities committed by Russian troops, the same degree of "victimization" would have to be applied to the thousands of male civilians who succumbed to Soviet crimes during the final months of battle.

In response to this continued debate and with hopes to further its discussion, the American historian Atina Grossman has recently published her article "*A Question of Silence: The Rape of German Women by Occupation Soldiers*". In this controversial work, Grossman highlights the inaccuracies in past research and the often overlooked factors involved in the study of the rape of German women by Russian soldiers. She

⁴⁸ Gisela Bock, "Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization and the State," *Women and Violence* 8:3 (1983): p. 402.

argues that the “victim status” of German women has been, in recent years, over-exaggerated and that the true number of rapes is most likely lower than what has previously been estimated.⁴⁹ Grossman explains how many German women negotiated sex with occupied soldiers, usually for food and protection. She refers to translated memoirs, such as *Women in Berlin*, which depict such circumstances of negotiated sex and indistinct incidences of rape. Grossman agrees with Norman Naimark in that “it is highly unlikely that historians will know how many German women were raped by Soviet soldiers”,⁵⁰ however, in light of what she calls “competitiveness on the status of victims” and a “feminist agenda”, she argues that these atrocities were most likely of a smaller number and the overall issue has been exaggerated.⁵¹ Although this debate still lingers in the works of scholars, there has been little response to Grossman’s argument, one that she has included in her latest book *Crimes of War: Guilt and Denial in the Twentieth Century*.

The third question that has dominated the recent study of Soviet war crimes is more general and has developed into a broader question of biases and scholarly professionalism than that of a historical debate: Where does the blame fall? How are these crimes depicted in scholarly works and how is natural human sympathy towards the victims addressed? This question may seem to have a simple answer, that is, the Russians are to blame for they committed these crimes, however, some historians have suggested that the Germans must also bear some responsibility due to their similar behavior on the Eastern Front. In the past two decades historians have struggled to produce an unbiased and reasonable depiction of these atrocities, one which accurately

⁴⁹ Grossmann, p. 46.

⁵⁰ Naimark, p. 129.

⁵¹ Grossman, p. 46.

illustrates the horrendous nature of Russian crimes against German civilians, but which also places these crimes within a broader context.

Immediately after the war and in the decades that followed, Soviet scholars, quite obviously, sympathized with Russian troops and their struggle to overthrow fascism. German compassion was not permitted and rarely discussed as concentration on war crimes revolved around Russian POWs and German concentration camps. In the 1960s, with the emergence of popular interest in the crimes of the Holocaust, this reluctance to sympathize with the Germans was reinforced. However, recent scholarly writings have challenged these pervasive stereotypes and have begun to show compassion for those who suffered at the hands of the Red Army. Interestingly, there has been a recent tendency for works to be overtly pro-German and largely sympathetic. There is absolutely no doubt that abhorrence for rape and murder and sympathy for the victims is universal and important, however, the tendency in many written works to ignore the greater context of the war and to disregard the fact that many Germans had supported or participated in similar atrocities against Russian civilians casts doubt on the comprehensiveness of the analysis.

Given the emotionally charged nature of these crimes it is no wonder that there has been difficulty in analyzing them in a dispassionate and systematic way. Instead, many historic studies have reflected the emotional reaction of their authors, sentiments such as anger, sympathy, and blame. Nevertheless, some authors, such as Norman Naimark, have been able to maintain a relatively unbiased perspective. Naimark compares both the German and Russian crimes on the Eastern Front while still concentrating on his topic of Russian occupation and describing the brutal details of

crimes inflicted by the Soviet troops. Such neutral depictions can also be found in the works of Bartov and Müller. Other, more emotional writers, such as Antony Beevor and Christopher Duffy, seem to place considerable blame on the Soviet soldiers without properly acknowledging the context in which these crimes were committed. They refuse to place any guilt or significant responsibility on the Germans, making only vague comparisons to the crimes committed by the Wehrmacht in the east. Alfred-Maurice de Zayas' book *A Terrible Revenge: The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans, 1944-1950* also directs blame on the Soviets and concentrates only on what critics have called a "victim-perspective".⁵² De Zayas gives disturbingly accurate details of the crimes that occurred in East Prussia and in Berlin, but despite his title, he makes few parallels between the two sets of crimes which occurred on the Eastern Front. Although these accounts are important to document and a degree of sympathy towards the victims is natural, assigning blame and relying solely on emotional description is not suitable for scholarly analysis.

This debate on the "assignment of guilt" has recently been taken in a new direction as the tendency for German sympathy has begun to lose momentum. Instead new scholarly works depict the Russian soldier in a more favorable light and the German crimes committed in the east against civilians and POWs are beginning to gain popular interest. James Mark accuses Antony Beevor of emphasizing the "role of the victim" in order to appeal to a British audience and to acquire higher book sales.⁵³ He also criticizes Beevor for ignoring the German crimes which had been committed on the Eastern Front. Mark attempts to expel the illusion that all Russian soldiers were

⁵² Rainer Ohliger, review of *A Terrible Revenge. The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans, 1944-1950*, by Alfred-Maurice de Zayas. *H-Soz-u-Kult*, 19.02 (1997).

⁵³ Mark, p. 134.

“sexually repressed” and “out of control”.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Mark argues that the reason for such a heavy placement of blame on only the Soviets is partly due to nationalist agendas of post-war political groups. He contends that after the war many countries, such as West Germany and Hungary, in their search for identity, used the stories of Russian atrocities to further their national interest and strengthen anti-communist movements.⁵⁵ This reevaluation of the “distribution of blame” is important to acknowledge and understand, for although the crimes committed against German civilians were atrocious and inexcusable, they may not have been accurately depicted in popular scholarly works and not placed properly within historical context.

The three questions that have guided the study of this newly revived topic have helped to create a detailed analytical framework for scholarly debates. Despite such a barrage of scholarly works and relevant literature, the study of Russian crimes and German affliction is still, very much, in its infancy. This topic has only achieved popular interest during the past fifteen years and has been limited in both its investigation and its extent of academic research. Only few historians have attempted to tackle such a controversial and novel topic and those who have often incorporate its mention only into larger works on military or political themes. There is still much room for further analysis and there are many significant factors and essential sources which have yet to be fully developed.

There is a pressing need for literature and scholarly works on the subject of the Soviet offensive and on the experiences of soldiers by Russian academics. Current

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 140.

writings are dominated by American, British and German historians and much of the Soviet account has been left to western interpretation and speculation. Of the few Russian publications that do mention the crimes committed against German civilians, such as Yelena Senyavskaya's *1941-1945*, very few are produced with an English translation. In their research many popular historians are forced to utilize only official letters and documents, written by Soviet officers and government agents, none of which give an accurate depiction of the crimes committed by the common Russian soldier. Due to literary censorship during the Cold War and the difficult task of acknowledging personal crimes, it is understandable that the memoirs and diaries of Red Army soldiers are relatively uncommon. However, with an increase of material written on related topics and with the encouragement of historical reassessment, hopefully a more liberal and socially adept range of literature will emerge, one which reveals a more intimate and relevant perspective.

There are also a number of specific topics in the study of Russian crimes which have yet to be properly evaluated, as available sources tend to concentrate only on specific incidences and few examples. Although the city of Berlin witnessed the brunt end of the atrocities it is only one area in which these crimes occurred, as the Soviet offensive was stretched along most of Eastern Europe. German regions such as East Prussia, Silesia and Pomerania also saw widespread cases of rape and civilian murder and in many ways these crimes were of a much more heinous nature. There is also very little mention of the Russian atrocities committed in other parts of Eastern Europe, such as Hungary and Yugoslavia, both of which endured similar brutal treatment and where

tens of thousands of civilians were routinely executed.⁵⁶ Scholarly interest also seems to concentrate, almost entirely, on incidences of rape, ignoring other crimes such as the torture and murder of civilians, widespread looting, and the treatment of prisoners of war. The study of rape in Germany during this period is still a significant subject and it deserves further investigation, however, other crimes must also be examined in closer detail. In this light, although recent works have produced valuable reassessments and posed important questions, there is still considerable work to be done in the study of Russian crimes and their impact on German civilians during the war.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

Bibliography

- Anonymous. *A Woman in Berlin, Eight Weeks in the Conquered City: A Diary*. Translated by Philip Boehm. New York: Henry Holt, 2000.
- Bartov, Omer. *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- _____. *The Eastern Front, 1941-45: German Troops and the Barbarization of Warfare*. 2nd Ed. Oxford: Palgrave, 2001.
- Beevor, Antony. *The Fall of Berlin 1945*. New York: Viking, 2002.
- Blumentritt, Günter. *Effects of Fortification on Strategic Planning*. Historical Division, European Command, Foreign Military Studies Branch. 1947.
- Bock, Gisela. "Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization and the State." *Women and Violence*. 8:3 (1983): 400-421.
- Craig, Gordon. *The Germans*. New York: Putnam Sons, 1981.
- _____. "The War of the German Historians." *The New York Review of Books* 33:21-22 (1987): 27-38.
- De Zayas, Alfred-Maurice. *A Terrible Revenge: Ethnic Cleansing of East Germany, 1944-50*. New York: Palgrave, 1994.
- Drange, Georg Guenther. *Small-Unit Tactics*. Historical Division, European Command, Foreign Military Studies Branch. 1947.
- Duffy, Christopher. *Red Storm on the Reich: The Soviet March on Germany, 1945*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Grossman, Atina. "A Question of Silence: The Rape of German Women by Occupation Soldiers." *Liberators Take Liberties* (1994): 42-63.
- _____. *Crimes of War: Guilt and Denial in the Twentieth Century*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003.
- Hillgruber, Andreas. *Germany and the Two World Wars*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- _____. *Zweierlei Untergang: Die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums*. Berlin: W.J. Siedler, 1986.

Koonz, Claudia. *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics*. New York: St.Martin's Griffin, 1988.

Kuby, Erich. *The Russians and Berlin, 1945*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1968.

Le Tissier, Tony. *Zhukov at the Oder: The Decisive Battle for Berlin*. Westport: Praeger, 1996.

_____. *With Our Back to Berlin*. 2nd Ed. Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2005.

Liebman, Stuart. "After the Fall: Women in the House of the Hangman." *Liberators Take Liberties* (1994): 4-14.

Mark, James. "Remembering Rape: Divided Social Memory and the Red Army in Hungary 1944-1945" *Past & Present* 188 (2005): 133-161.

Mawdsley, Evan. *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War, 1941-1945*. London: Hodder Education, 2005.

Müller, Rolf-Dieter and Gerd R.Ueberschar. *Hitler's War in the East 1941-1945, Critical Assessment*. Translated by Bruce Little. Oxford: Berghahn, 1997.

Naimark Norman. "About 'the Russian' and About Us – the Question of Rape and Soviet-German Relations in the East Zone." (unpublished paper) in *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (1995):132-140.

_____. *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Ohliger, Ranier. Review of *A Terrible Revenge. The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans, 1944-1950*, by Alfred-Maurice de Zayas. *H-Soz-u-Kult*, 19.02 (1997).

Rendulic, Lothar. *Army Group South*. Historical Division, European Command, Foreign Military Studies Branch. 1946.

Schmidt-Harzbach, Ingrid. *Eine Woche im April, 1945*. Hamburg: Männerphantasien und Krieg, 1993.

Seaton, Albert. *The Russo-German War*. 1st Ed. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1970.

Senyavskaya, Yelena. *1941-1945*. Moscow: Frontovoe pokolenie, 1995.

Strawson, John. *The Battle for Berlin*. London: B.T. Batsford, 1974.

Tsouras, Peter G. *Fighting in Hell: The German Ordeal on the Eastern Front*. London: Greenhill Books, 1995.