An Anonymous Woman's Description of the First Days of the Soviet Occupation of Berlin (Retrospective Account, 1950s)

Abstract

As Soviet troops occupied eastern Germany, including Berlin, they perpetrated rampant acts of sexual violence against women and girls. This account was written by a German woman who wished to remain anonymous. Among other subjects, it addresses the way in which Germanness intersected with gender at the end of the war. It also describes certain "German" versus "Russian" (or "Soviet") values and their perceived effects on masculinity.

The book was first published in English in 1954 and was a major success in the United States. The first German edition was published in Switzerland in 1959, but the German public largely rejected the book, considering it a disgrace to German women. In 2003, a new German edition was published; it quickly became a commercial success and gave rise to a film adaptation in 2008. Journalist Jens Bisky questioned the account's authenticity, however, and revealed the identity of the anonymous author as journalist Marta Hillers (who died in 2001). Recent research using the author's manuscripts and other sources has confirmed Hillers as the author but has also revealed that she edited her account significantly in the 1950s before it was first published.

Source

Wednesday, May 2, 1945; and the rest of Tuesday.

[...]

Toward evening we heard some commotion, someone kicking and pounding the front door. I opened it a crack, keeping the chain on, and caught a glimpse of something white – the baker from Tuesday morning, in his military issue smock. He wanted to come in. I didn't want him to and acted as if Anatol were inside. Then he asked me for some other girl, any girl, an address, a hint as to where he might find one – he said he'd give her flour for it, much flour, and me, too, for mediating. I don't know of any girl; I don't want to know any. He got pushy, forced his foot in the door, started tearing at the chain. With difficulty I managed to push him out and slam the door.

Yes, girls are a commodity increasingly in short supply. Now everyone's ready when the men go on the hunt for women, so they lock up their girls, hide them in the crawl spaces, pack them off to secure apartments. At the pump, people whisper about a woman doctor who's fixed up a room in the air-raid shelter as a quarantine hospital, with big signs in German and Russian warning of typhus. But the patients are just very young girls from the neighboring apartment buildings, the quarantine is a ruse the doctor came up with to preserve their virginity.

[...]

The Russians at the pump don't spend much time sizing up us water carriers. They've already caught on that it's mostly old, gnarled women who are sent to the pump. When I'm there I, too, wrinkle my forehead, pull down the corners of my mouth, and squint in order to look as ancient and wretched as I can.

At first, before I started sticking out like a sore thumb, our Russian guests often asked me how old I was. If I told them I'd just turned thirty they would grin and say, "Aha, she's a sly one, pretending to be older than she really is." Then I'd show my ID, and they had no choice but to believe me. They can't really tell with us: they're used to their Russian women, who have lots of children and are quickly worn out; they can't read how old our bodies are – even if most of us look miserable compared with how we looked in peacetime.

A red-cheeked Russian walks down our line playing an accordion and calling out to us. *"Gitler kaputt, Goebbels kaputt. Stalin ist gut*." He laughs and cackles one of their mother curses, slaps a comrade on the shoulder, and shouts in Russian, even though the people in line won't understand a thing, "Look at him! A Russian soldier. And he's marched from Moscow to Berlin!" They're all so proud of their victory they're bursting their buttons. Even they are amazed that they made it this far. We swallow it all, stand in line and wait.

[…]

I try to imagine what the Russians think about all these things lying around unprotected and abandoned. There are deserted apartments in every building that are theirs for the taking. Basements with whatever is stowed in them. There's nothing in this city that isn't theirs if they want it – the problem is there's simply too much. They can no longer take it all in, this abundance; they nonchalantly grab the objects that catch their eye, then lose them or pass them on; they haul things away and then discard them as soon as they become a burden. This is the first time I've seen them take the trouble to really pack up and mail some of the plunder. For the most part they have no ability to assess the value of things. They snatch the first thing they see and have no concept of quality or price – why should they? They've always just worn what they've been allotted; they don't know how to judge and choose, how to figure out what's good, what's expensive. When they steal bedding, for instance, they're just looking for something to lie down on right away. They can't tell eiderdown from shoddy. And what they value most of all is liquor.

While she sews, the bookseller passes on what she knows. Yes, eighteen-year-old Stinchen is still being kept by her mother in the crawl space, lately during the day as well, ever since two Russians came back with the designated water carriers, burst into the apartment, brandished their pistols, and shot a hole in the linoleum floor. The girl looks pasty. No wonder. But at least she's still intact. The bookseller also tells about some new residents, two young sisters, one a war widow with a three-year-old son. They moved into one of the empty apartments, where they carry on with the soldiers, sometimes by day, sometimes by night; rumor has it things are very merry there. We also learn that a woman across the street jumped out a fourth-story window when some Ivans were after her. She's buried in the little yard in front of the cinema. A number of people have apparently been buried there. I can't say, since I take a different path to get my water. And that's the only place you go to outside these days.

[…]

Thursday, May 5, and the rest of Wednesday

[…]

With a good deal of self-restraint, the widow declined Petka's largesse and sent him on his way, together with his trunk. Not that she'd been plagued by moral scruples: "Why should I be? After all, they carried off my trunk, too, didn't they?" And that from a woman of proper bourgeois breeding, from a good German home. No, her reservations were of a purely practical nature: "I can't wear those things. The trunk was obviously taken from one of the neighboring buildings. If I went out with those clothes on I'd risk running into their rightful owner." So she limited her take to two pairs of shoes – she couldn't resist, they were exactly her size. Brown street shoes,

nondescript and easy to disguise with a little black polish, according to the widow. She wanted to give one of the pairs to me; goodness knows I could use them, since the only shoes I have are the ones I'm wearing. Unfortunately they're too small.

The afternoon passed quietly. We didn't see any of our acquaintances, not Anatol or Petka, Grisha, Vanya, Yasha, or Andrei the schoolteacher. The major, however, showed up promptly at sunset, along with his chubby Uzbek shadow and someone else – thank God not the surly lieutenant with the hiking pole. No, this time it was a little red-cheeked boy in a blue sailor's suit, eighteen years old, Soviet navy. Apparently they've taken Berlin by sea as well. We certainly have enough lakes around. The sailor looks like a schoolboy; he smiles innocently from ear to ear as he tells me quietly he has a favor to ask.

Please, go ahead! I call him over to the window, through which we can still smell the stench of burning. And then the little sailor asks politely and very like a child whether I would be so kind as to find a girl for him, a nice clean girl, respectable and kind. He'd bring her food, too.

I stare at the boy, trying not to laugh out loud. Isn't that the limit – now they're demanding that their sexual spoils be tidy and well behaved and have a noble character to boot! Next thing they'll be asking women to present a police affidavit testifying to their clean record before they're allowed to bed down with the victors! But this one just gazes at me with hopeful eyes and looks so tender-skinned, so much like mama's little boy, that I can't be mad at him. So I shake my head with the proper regret and explain to him that I haven't been living in the building very long, that I hardly know a soul, and that, sad to say, I don't know where he might find such a nice girl. He takes it all in, visibly disappointed. I have an urge to check behind his ears to see if he's still wet. But I know that even the most seemingly gentle Russian can turn into a savage beast if you rub him the wrong way or offend his self-esteem. I just want to know why they keep expecting me to play matchmaker. Probably because I'm the only one around who understands them when they say what they're after.

My sailor boy held out his little paw to thank me and then took off. But why are these youngsters so eager in their pursuit of anything female? At home they'd probably wait a little longer, though it's true that most of them marry earlier than our men. They probably want to prove themselves to their older comrades, like sixteen-year-old Vanya, the stairwell rapist, to show that they're real men, too.

Anyway, the unbridled raping sprees of the first few days are over. The spoils are now in short supply. I hear that other women have done the same thing I have, that they're now spoken for and therefore taboo. The widow has more details concerning the two drink-and-be-merry sisters: evidently they're for officers only, who don't take kindly to low-ranking poachers trespassing on their private preserve. As a rule, those who don't have marching orders in their pockets look for a more permanent arrangement, something exclusive, and they're prepared to pay. They've realized how bad off we are when it comes to food. And the language of bread and bacon and herring – their principal gifts – is internationally understood.

[…]

The major shows me one more photo, of a good-looking girl with scrupulously parted hair, the daughter of a Polish professor in whose house the major was billeted last winter.

He starts to grill me about my own situation, but I answer evasively. I don't want to talk about that. Then he wants to know about my schooling and is full of respect when I tell him about the *Gymnasium* and the languages I speak and my travels across Europe. "You have good qualifications," he says, appreciatively. Then all of a sudden he

wonders why German girls are all so slender, with no fat – had we really had that little to eat? And after that he starts going on about what it would be like if he took me back to Russia, if I were his wife, if I could meet his parents. He promises to fatten me up with chicken and cream; they used to live very well at his home before the war ... I let him go on fantasizing. It's clear how impressed he is by my "education," though admittedly his Russian standards are pretty modest. My schooling makes me desirable in his eyes. That's a far cry from our German men, for whom being well read does little to enhance a woman's appeal, at least in my experience. In fact, my instinct has always been to play down my intelligence for them, to make a pretense of ignorance – or at least to keep quiet until I know them better. A German man always wants to be smarter, always wants to be in a position to teach his little woman. But that's something Soviet men don't know about –the idea of the little woman tending her cozy home. In the Soviet Union, education is highly valued: it's so rare, so sought after, and so much in demand that it has a special aura, particularly with the authorities. It also brings special pay, which is what the major is getting at when he explains to me that I would have no difficulty finding a "qualified job" in his homeland. Thank you very much, I know you mean well, but I've had my fill of this Russian brand of schooling. Too many night classes. And as soon as they're finally over I intend to reclaim the evenings for myself.

Once again he's singing, quietly, melodically. I enjoy hearing it. He's upstanding, frank, and clean. But he's also distant and so unfinished. Whereas we Westerners are old and experienced and tremendously clever – and now no more than dirt beneath their boots.

[...]

Looking back on Friday, May 4, recorded on Saturday, May 5

The major showed up around 11 A.M. He'd gathered that Anatol was back in the area and wanted to know if I had ... I said no, that Anatol had just brought his men over for fun and drink but that he'd had to hurry back into town. The major swallowed it. I felt rotten. Sooner or later they're going to bump into each other. What am I supposed to do? I'm nothing but booty – prey that has to stand back and let the hunters decide what to do with their game and how to parcel out. Still, I very much hope that Anatol won't be coming back.

This time the major brought all sorts of sweets, Luftwaffe provisions, concentrated foodstuffs. We ate some for dessert, just the three of us, because the major couldn't stay long. He didn't know whether to laugh or get angry when I told him about his Uzbek and the offer of stockings. Finally he decided to laugh. He promised to return in the evening. There was an edge to his voice, and he gave me a sharp look. Now I'm not so sure that I can control him. I have to watch myself and not forget that they're our masters.

[...]

What else did the day bring? Another stair victim, once again an older woman, about sixty; the younger ones don't dare venture into the stairwell by day. This time it was one of the three dressmakers, the black-pudding sisters. They'd heard that Anatol's men had vacated their apartment, so they made their way into the abandoned rooms, escorted by our deserter. Together they fished a sewing machine out of the trash and general clutter and lugged it up two flights of stairs. Then one of the aunties went back down by herself, to salvage some other sewing equipment – and ran right into the hands of a Russian. When the widow spoke with her it was nearly evening and the dressmaker was still sobbing on the sofa in the booksellers' apartment, surrounded by a whole bevy of women, moaning and groaning.

They got hold of the concierge's younger daughter as well, her mother told me today at the pump. At first the whole family – mother, two daughters, and the three-year-old grandson – had stayed hidden in the basement next

door, which was well secured. But once people started saying that things were a little better with the Russians, the girls went back to their apartment on the first floor to cook and do their wash. That's where two drunken, singing heroes caught them by surprise. According to the mother, they left the older sister alone. I've seen the girl in the meantime and I can understand why: she looks clinically emaciated, and her face is so small, her cheeks so hollow, that the outline of her skull shows through. Her mother whispered to me that the younger daughter had barricaded herself with cotton wool, though there was no real reason to, but the girls had heard that the Russians don't like women at that time of month. It didn't help. The men just howled with laughter as they tossed the stuff around the room and then took the sixteen-year-old on the chaise longue in the kitchen. "She's doing well so far," her mother said, herself amazed. Even so, just to be safe, she took her daughter up to the booksellers', where the widow says she's been boasting to everyone how the Russians went straight for her without giving her older sister even a second glance.

[...]

Saturday, May 5, 1945

[...]

A number of men showed up in the afternoon, German men this time, from our own building. It felt very strange, once again being around men you don't have the slightest reason to fear, men you don't have to constantly gauge or be on guard against or keep an eye on. They recounted the saga of the bookseller that is now echoing throughout the building, the tale of how this Bavarian, a gnarled stump of a man, really and truly yelled at a Russian. It all happened right outside the couple's door, when an Ivan grabbed the bookseller's wife as she was coming back with water. (She won't let her husband go to the pump because he was in the party.) The woman shrieked, and her husband came running out of the apartment, making straight for the Ivan and shouting, "You damned bastard! You prick!" As the saga has it, the Russian piped down, shriveled up, and backed off. So it can be done after all. The Russian's barbarian-animal instinct must have told him that the bookseller was capable of anything at that moment, that his rage had blinded him to all consequences – so the soldier simply relinquished his booty.

It's the first time I've heard of one of our men responding with that kind of red-eyed wrath. Most of them are reasonable – they react with their heads, they're worried about saving their own skins, and their wives fully support them in this. No man loses face for relinquishing a woman to the victors, be it his wife or his neighbor's. On the contrary, they would be censured if they provoked the Russians by resisting. But that still leaves something unresolved. I'm convinced that this particular woman will never forget her husband's fit of courage, or perhaps you could say it was love. And you can hear the respect in the way the men tell the story, too.

[...]

Soon we're all sitting across from one another: the two soldiers, Fräulein Behn, Frau Lehmann, with Lutz clinging to her knee, and me. The baby is right there in her stroller. The older Russian asks me to translate: "What a beautiful little girl! A real beauty!" And he winds his index finger into one of the baby's copper curls. Then he asks me to tell the two women that he also has two children, two boys, who are living with their grandmother in the country. He fishes a photo out of his battered cardboard wallet: two crew-cut heads on paper that's turned a darkish brown. He hasn't seen them since 1941. I've figured out that the concept of home leave is foreign to nearly all the Russians. Most of them have been separated from their families since the beginning of the war; that's nearly four years. I assume that this is because most of the war has been fought in their country, and with the civilian

population being transferred back and forth no one knows for sure where his family is at any given moment. On top of that, there's the enormous distances and the pitiful condition of the roads. It's also possible that, at least in the first years of the German advance, the authorities were afraid their people might desert or go over to the other side. Whatever the case, these men were never entitled to home leave like ours were. I explain this to the two women, and Frau Lehmann says, full of understanding, '"Well, that excuses some things."

The second Russian guest is a young boy of seventeen, a former partisan who joined up with the westward advancing troops. He looks at me, brow deeply furrowed, and asks me to translate that in his village German soldiers stabbed some children to death and took others by the feet and bashed their heads against a wall. Before I translate, I ask, "Did you hear that? Or see it yourself?" He gazes off and says in a stern voice, "I saw it twice myself." I translate.

"I don't believe it," answers Frau Lehmann. "Our soldiers? My husband? Never!" Fräulein Behn tells me to ask the Russian whether the soldiers in question had "a bird here" (on their caps) or "a bird there" (on their arms) – in other words, whether they were Wehrmacht or SS. The Russian understands the question right away – the villagers probably learned to make that distinction. But even if it was SS men in this case and similar ones, our conquerors will consider them part of the "nation" and charge us all accordingly. Talk like this is already making the rounds; today at the pump I heard several people say, "Our boys probably weren't much different over there."

Silence. We all stare into space. A shadow has fallen in the room. The baby pays no attention – she bites the foreign finger, cooing and squealing. I feel a lump rising in my throat. She seems like a miracle to me, pink and white with copper curls, flowering here in this desolate, half-looted room, among us adult human beings so mired in filth. And suddenly I realize why the warriors are drawn to the little baby.

[…]

Yuliya von Saal, "Anonyma: Eine Frau in Berlin. Geschichte eines Bestsellers," in *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 67 (2019), pp. 343–76.

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