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## From Victims to Actors: Women's Struggle for Agency in Defeated Germany, 1945

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From Victims to Actors:  
Women's Struggle for Agency in Defeated Germany, 1945

Kelsey Fritz

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## Introduction

On May 2, 1945, Ruth Andreas-Friedrich, a journalist and member of an anti-Nazi resistance group, finally recorded in her diary the news that she and her comrades had been waiting years for: “Hitler lies dead in the chancellery.” However, rather than the elation that she expected to experience upon hearing such news, Andreas-Friedrich felt only the “absurdity of this moment,” realizing that Hitler had ceased to be important in the midst of her struggle for food and survival during the Battle of Berlin. As an epitaph for the dead Führer, Andreas-Friedrich noted only that the “Third Reich [had] vanished like a ghost” and Hitler was “nothing to us now.”<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere in Germany, one month earlier in Franconia, a region in northern Bavaria, around one hundred women of the village of Aub appeared en masse before the local German military commander, who had orders to defend Aub to the last against the approaching Americans. Hoping to avert the destruction of their homes, the women pleaded with the commander to surrender the village peacefully when the Americans arrived. However, when he stood firm, vowing not to withdraw, the women had no choice but to return home empty-handed, plagued by uncertainty as to the fate of their homes.<sup>2</sup>

What these two anecdotes make clear is that, at the end of the Second World War, women across Germany became actors, however daunting the obstacles before them, seeking to influence their own fates in the face of Allied invasion and the collapse of the Nazi government. Indeed, Andreas-Friedrich marveled at her indifference to Hitler’s death because, as the Battle of Berlin shrunk her horizons, Hitler no longer had an influence on her fate: only she could ensure her continued survival. Similarly, the women of Aub acted to protect their village, their homes,

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Andreas-Friedrich, *Battleground Berlin: Diaries 1945-1948*, trans. Anna Boerresen (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1990), 14

<sup>2</sup> Stephen G. Fritz, *Endkampf: Soldiers, Civilians, and the Death of the Third Reich* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 122-123.

and their families, knowing that neither the Nazi government nor the Wehrmacht (German armed forces) could do anything to stop the Americans' advance and thus that the fate of their village hinged on the decision of local officials, people whom they could influence. In the chaotic final weeks of the war, as Allied armies closed in on Germany from east and west, the Wehrmacht began to disintegrate, and the Nazi system started to collapse, the war truly came home to German women such as those mentioned above, who sought to retain some control over their lives and influence their own fates as the world imploded around them.

These complex struggles comprise the heart of this study, which aims to examine the multifaceted experiences of German women at the end of the Second World War, as well as the effects such experiences had upon the development of Allied occupation during the chaotic year of 1945. Taking a comparative approach, this paper will examine the attempts of German women in Berlin and Bavaria to remain in control of their lives during the fateful spring of 1945 and the initial months of Allied occupation. In doing so, I hope to examine the ways in which women's struggles to regain whatever agency they could throughout this crucial period not only influenced their perceptions of the Allied occupiers, but also had an impact on the direction of Allied occupation policy itself. Ultimately, this paper intends to demonstrate that German women fought to remain in control of their lives during the chaotic end of the Second World War in whatever manner they could, a struggle that would shape both their perceptions and the direction of the Allied occupation of Germany.

### **Viewpoints of Defeat**

As a study of the effects of Nazi Germany's defeat and the beginning of Allied occupation upon German women, this paper is necessarily and productively centered around firsthand accounts of this period, especially those written by female diarists. While this study

will partially rely upon eyewitness accounts by women that are reprinted in scholarly monographs on the period, the heart of the sources will be the diaries of three highly observant and articulate women: Ruth Andreas-Friedrich, Ursula von Kardorff, and an anonymous diarist in Berlin.

A journalist by profession and active member of a small anti-Nazi resistance group in Berlin that was largely dedicated to helping Jews escape Nazi persecution, Ruth Andreas-Friedrich was highly critical of Hitler's continued resistance in 1944 and 1945, after all was clearly lost. A resident of Berlin throughout the war, Andreas-Friedrich recorded the tension, claustrophobia, and sheer fear of the unknown that accompanied the Battle of Berlin, during which she and her friends largely lived in the cellar of their apartment block. Moreover, in comparison to the experiences of many other women, Andreas-Friedrich's account is unique, as the male members of her resistance group were not on the front lines and, as such, were present to protect her from the mass rapes of the Soviet Red Army.<sup>3</sup>

Like Andreas-Friedrich, Ursula von Kardorff was also a journalist, anti-Nazi, and Berlin resident throughout much of the war; however, rather than remain in Berlin for the final battle, Kardorff fled south to Bavaria in late February 1945. In September 1945, Kardorff traveled back to Berlin, a journey that afforded her the opportunity, not available to other German women, to observe the treatment of civilians, especially women, in both the American and Soviet occupation zones. In addition to her travels, Kardorff's remarks are also quite interesting because of her personal convictions, as she, in contrast to Andreas-Friedrich, remained a German patriot to the bitter end, perhaps due to her aristocratic Prussian background.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ruth Andreas-Friedrich, *Berlin Underground, 1938-1945*, trans. Barrows Mussey (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1947), 203-205.

<sup>4</sup> Ursula von Kardorff, *Diary of a Nightmare: Berlin 1942-1945*, trans. Ewan Butler (London: Rupert Hart-Davis LTD, 1965), 195-196.

By contrast, unlike Andreas-Friedrich or Kardorff, little is known about the author of the diary published as *A Woman in Berlin*, as she remained anonymous when the diary was first published in 1954. Due to the controversy surrounding the diary, which bluntly recounts the author's multiple rapes by Red Army soldiers, it was not republished in Germany until 2003. At that time, journalist Jens Bisky claimed to have identified the author as Berlin journalist Marta Hillers. However, as the executor of the author's estate refused to confirm Bisky's claim, this paper will refer to the diarist as Anonymous.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the diaries of Andreas-Friedrich, Kardorff, and Anonymous, this study will also incorporate the accounts of Allied war correspondents, such as Australian journalist Osmar White and Soviet writer Vasily Grossman, who not only observed the behavior of their own countrymen vis a vis German women, but also provide a true outsider's perspective of the condition of Germany in 1945. A final major source is the official U.S. Army *Pocket Guide to Germany*, which was issued to all U.S. soldiers entering Germany and contains valuable insights into the American military's desired view of Germany and the German people. By incorporating firsthand accounts of both German women and outside observers, this study aims to utilize the broadest array of contemporary observers possible to explore the reactions of German women to the defeat of Nazi Germany.

While there has been a proliferation of scholarly monographs written about the Second World War in general and the end of the war specifically, the majority of these works only briefly address the situation of German women during this period and even fewer discuss the effect of women's experiences upon the development of occupation. Many such studies of the war's end are military histories, focused on battles, the decisions of generals, and the experiences

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<sup>5</sup> Antony Beevor, "Introduction," in Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin: Eight Weeks in the Conquered City: A Diary*, trans. Philip Boehm (New York: Picador, 2005), xv; Luke Harding, "Row over naming of rape author," *The Guardian*, October 4, 2003.

of soldiers. Additionally, several military histories of the period focus on the actions of the Allied armies during military occupation of Germany. Although histories such as these do offer some discussion of the conduct of troops, whether American or Soviet, with regard to German civilians, these discussions are typically brief in comparison with the length of the works.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to military histories, many other works on this period focus on Germany as a whole. Because of these works' broad geographic and temporal focus, they allow for little in-depth discussion of women's actions during the period in question. The most detailed monographs are often regional histories, which offer a thorough, albeit limited, look at one area of Germany alone. Finally, works that do center upon the experiences of women tend to focus only on the sexual interactions between German women and Allied soldiers, whether they took the form of mass rape or fraternization.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, by studying in detail the attempts of German women in the American and Soviet zones to remain in control of their lives during the chaotic final days of Nazi Germany and the effect of such experiences upon the development of Allied occupation, this paper will add a new, previously neglected, dimension to discussions of the immediate postwar period, one that takes into account German women's struggle for agency throughout this period.

### **The End of Normality and the Struggle to Remain Actors**

By mid-April 1945, it was painfully clear to all but the most fanatical Nazi supporters that Germany had lost the war.<sup>8</sup> Having encircled the Ruhr industrial region earlier in the month, American forces now streamed across central and southern Germany, reaching both the Elbe River in the east, where they linked up with Soviet forces, and Nürnberg in the south by mid-

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<sup>6</sup> See Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945*; Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*; Earl Ziemke, *The U.S. Army in the Occupation of Germany 1944-1946*.

<sup>7</sup> See Richard Bessel, *Germany 1945*; Ian Kershaw, *The End*; Stephen G. Fritz, *Endkampf*.

<sup>8</sup> See Figure 1 for a map of Germany in 1945.

month.<sup>9</sup> Having reached the Oder River, just forty miles from Berlin, in late January, the Red Army finally launched its attack toward Berlin on April 16, surrounding the city completely by the 25<sup>th</sup>.<sup>10</sup> Facing this onslaught from both east and west, for most civilian observers the only question remaining was when the moment of final defeat and surrender would occur. At this point, as the “Nazi war machine” became nothing more than “an empty shell” and “all that was left of Hitler’s ‘Greater German Reich’ was a country in shock,” on what remained of the home front, German women faced what essentially amounted to the end of normality, as the pressures of imminent defeat eroded the rhythms of everyday life.<sup>11,12</sup>

Nearly-incessant Allied bombing and the onset of artillery shelling as the Red Army came within range of Berlin resulted in scenes of utter devastation, often in cities and towns already scarred by years of war. This physical destruction of Germany in turn resulted in the collapse of earlier essential services for modern society, including electricity and running water. When all of this combined with the collapse of the Nazi rationing system and an acute lack of food, German women surely felt as though their world was imploding around them in the spring of 1945. However, rather than passively accept their loss of control over their daily lives and submit to being at the mercy of the war, German women instead became actors in their own fates, seeking to retain as much control as possible over their lives, a phenomenon which will be explored in the coming sections.

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 47; Fritz, *Endkampf*, 174.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen G. Fritz, *Ostkrieg: Hitler’s War of Extermination in the East* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 459; Bessel, *Germany 1945*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Bessel, *Germany 1945*, 46.

<sup>12</sup> It is not unreasonable to speak of an “end of normality” in 1945 for German civilians such as the women mentioned in this paper, who did not belong to groups targeted by the Nazis. In using this term, I refer to the normality of daily life, including the ability to obtain sufficient food, have functioning utilities, and go to work, which was preserved relatively well for many civilians until 1945. This was normality from the specific perspective of civilians in Nazi Germany. This being said, it is important to note that I am not suggesting that six years of war and twelve years of Nazi dictatorship were “normal,” only that many German civilians were able to have relatively normal daily lives within an extremely abnormal framework until 1945. For more information, see Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich*.



## Bombing and Shelling

Before addressing the ways in which German women struggled to regain control over their lives, it is first important to understand how this end of normality – and their growing sense of defiance in the face of it – came about. The originating factor in the disintegration of everyday life in the spring of 1945 was the ever-more-frequent Allied bombing of German cities and towns during the first five months of 1945. Although the Allies had been bombing Germany for years, by early 1945 they enjoyed complete air superiority over the country, as the Luftwaffe's (German Air Force) dire lack of fuel ensured that its fighter planes remained grounded. Such dominance of the skies allowed the British and Americans, in round-the-clock bombing, to drop unprecedented numbers of bombs on Germany: in March 1945 alone, the Western Allies combined dropped over 133,000 tons of bombs on German cities, towns, railroads, and industrial sites.<sup>13</sup> In Berlin, Ruth Andreas-Friedrich noted the increasing frequency of air raids in early April, remarking on the fact that the radio now announced “the customary evening air-raid alarm” each night. Moreover, as the front lines approached Berlin, Andreas-Friedrich wrote that the authorities “[gave] up any attempt to time enemy flights,” meaning that the electricity was no longer turned off at consistent times, making it nearly impossible to eat regular meals.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the bombing only grew in intensity as the Soviets began to encircle Berlin in preparation for the final battle. On April 20, Hitler's last birthday, Andreas-Friedrich found herself in the midst of “endless” waves of air attacks. Emerging from her basement to survey the damage, she observed, rather eerily, that “the horizon is red, as if blood had been poured over it,”

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<sup>13</sup> Bessel, *Germany 1945*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Andreas-Friedrich, *Berlin Underground*, 234.

with “a grumbling like distant thunder” coming from the east.<sup>15</sup> That distant thunder was, in fact, Soviet artillery drawing ever-closer to Berlin. Indeed, four days later, Andreas-Friedrich’s own apartment block came under fire, forcing her and her friends to begin living in the basement, “jammed in among all the rubbish and odds and ends,” with the “war [kicking] up over [their] heads.” Soon after, Andreas-Friedrich heard the first machine gun bullets “slapping into the walls,” as the war arrived, quite literally, on her doorstep.<sup>16</sup> In a different part of Berlin, Anonymous’s apartment building also came under fire, causing her to observe on April 22 that her “days are accented with flak and artillery fire.” When she visited a friend that night, they sat in silence, listening to “a constant, tinny rattle,” likely machine guns, “punctuated by the drumlike flak.” As the noise droned on, Anonymous realized that she was helpless to do anything about the shelling; all she could do was “sit it out and wait” for the Soviets to arrive and for whatever might happen at that point.<sup>17</sup>

It is no surprise that both Anonymous’s and Andreas-Friedrich’s accounts of the Battle of Berlin prominently feature Soviet artillery fire as a major cause – perhaps the major cause, as it led to the breakdown of supplies and utilities – of the disruption of their everyday lives during the final days of the battle.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, from the morning of April 21 until Berlin’s surrender on May 2, Soviet artillery units fired 1.8 million shells into the city.<sup>19</sup> Given the sheer extent of the Red Army’s artillery attack on Berlin, Anonymous and Andreas-Friedrich were both extremely lucky not to lose their lives at the outset, as many women were killed while attempting to keep to the rhythms of everyday life: lining up for rations or fetching water from pumps once water lines

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 272-273.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>17</sup> Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin: Eight Weeks in the Conquered City: A Diary*, trans. Philip Boehm (New York: Picador, 2005), 18.

<sup>18</sup> Fritz, *Ostkrieg*, 428.

<sup>19</sup> Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 262.

into apartment blocks were turned off.<sup>20</sup> However, even as everyday life could easily become deadly, women refused to surrender their control over their lives to the mercy of the war.

Instead, the trips to the water pump or the desperate dashes around their neighborhoods to find food came to symbolize women's transformation into actors, as they sought to influence their own fates and ensure their own continued survival.

This resolve in the face of the end of normality emboldened many women, who came to feel that they were truly independent of – and even superior to – German men, as those who remained in Berlin became more apathetic and dejected as the Soviets advanced nearer and nearer the city.<sup>21</sup> Anonymous echoed these feelings, writing, “I keep noticing how my feelings toward men – and the feelings of all the other women – are changing. We feel sorry for them; they seem so miserable and powerless...The Nazi world – ruled by men, glorifying the strong man – is beginning to crumble, and with it the myth of ‘Man.’”<sup>22</sup> By braving the artillery fire and attempting to carry on with their lives, women now had “a share” in the “privilege of killing and being killed for the fatherland,” which “has transformed us, emboldened us,” as Anonymous saw it. For her, the defeat of Nazi Germany was also the “defeat of the male sex.”<sup>23</sup> In this way, while the Allied bombing and shelling of Berlin tested Anonymous, Andreas-Friedrich, and their fellow women – and the war certainly dominated their lives – they did not allow it to fully control them, as they retained a strong desire to influence their own fates, a desire that soon would be sorely tested when the Red Army entered Berlin.

As the Americans entered Bavaria in April 1945, women in the countryside also

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>21</sup> Antony Beevor estimates that Berlin's population was between 3 and 3.5 million people in early April 1945. Of those people, Richard Bessel estimates that over 63 percent were female. The men remaining were wounded soldiers and men physically unfit for military service, in addition to Volkssturm men and soldiers assigned to defend Berlin against the Soviets. See *The Fall of Berlin 1945* and *Germany 1945* for more information.

<sup>22</sup> Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin*, 42-43.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 43.

experienced the end of normality as brought about by the unquestioned Allied air superiority. In rural Bavaria, where Allied planes had more room to maneuver, fighter-bombers were especially feared, as they were capable of flying low to the ground in order to strafe supply warehouses or trains.<sup>24</sup> These fighter-bomber attacks, often occurring in the middle of the day, greatly disrupted the rhythms of life in rural areas, as women commuting to jobs in larger towns or attempting to work in the fields did so under the shadow of Tiefflieger (low-flying fighter-bombers) attacks.<sup>25</sup> In early April 1945, Lotte Gebert nearly became a victim of a Tiefflieger attack in Middle Franconia, a district in northern Bavaria.<sup>26</sup> While on her way to work in Bad Windsheim, a small city that was a regional transport and economic center, Gebert “heard the hum of an airplane,” causing her to take shelter “under a large tree with [her] face and body pressed to the ground,” as the plane flew over, “machine gun rattling.” As the airplane flew away, Gebert recalled tears running down her cheeks, a sign both of the intense fear and the equally intense feeling of being hunted that Tiefflieger attacks engendered.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Anni Pachtner, who encountered a Tiefflieger while working in fields near Bad Windsheim, also remembered feeling hunted by the airplane, which “attacked me straightaway. I thought that this was the end.”<sup>28</sup>

This feeling of intense helplessness, of being “trapped as helpless prey in a surreal yet deadly game over which one had no control,” was by no means confined to Middle Franconia alone within Bavaria.<sup>29</sup> In Jettingen, a small village in the district of Swabia in southwestern Bavaria, Ursula von Kardorff reported precisely the same feeling of unescapable helplessness,

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<sup>24</sup> Fritz, *Endkampf*, 39.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 37, 39.

<sup>26</sup> For locations in Bavaria, see Figure 2.

<sup>27</sup> Lotte Gebert, personal account in *Windsheimer Zeitung*, April 4, 1995, quoted in Fritz, *Endkampf*, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Anni Pachtner, personal account in *Windsheimer Zeitung*, April 8, 1995, quoted in Fritz, *Endkampf*, 37.

<sup>29</sup> Fritz, *Endkampf*, 38.

noting on April 11 that “aircraft are overhead all day long and one hears bombs exploding in the distance. One feels quite helpless when one realizes that it all depends on one man at the top whether...Jettingen is destroyed or not.”<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, perhaps because the bombings and Tiefflieger attacks of April and May 1945 often represented the first instances of the war truly coming home to women in the countryside, neither Kardorff, Gebert, nor Pachtner found a sense of empowerment or a return of control over their lives in their experiences, as Anonymous and other Berlin women did. Furthermore, because the population was more dispersed in Bavaria, it was unlikely that, outside of major cities such as Munich and Nürnberg, these attacks were the day-to-day occurrences that the shelling in Berlin was. For women in Bavaria, the increased aerial attacks of April 1945 thus brought with them the shock of the end of normality, as day-to-day routines were interrupted by the threat of Tiefflieger attacks and a pervasive sense of being helpless prey descended upon the population. However, as will be seen, Bavarian women would not long remain exclusively at the mercy of the war, but would soon reassert their desire for some sense of control over their lives and their fates.

### **Physical Devastation and Lack of Services**

The bombing and shelling that first heralded the end of normality for German women turned cities across Germany into scenes of utter devastation, as buildings stood in ruins, the detritus of war littered the streets, and the corpses of civilians and soldiers lay unburied. For the women who had to attempt to find food and shelter amidst the ruins of their cities, the physical devastation of Germany in the spring of 1945 only added to the sense that their world had imploded and that normality had been destroyed alongside the edifice of Nazi Germany. While many Bavarian cities, towns, and villages were damaged or destroyed in the final weeks of the war, a point that will be touched upon later, for the purposes of sketching the condition of

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<sup>30</sup> Kardorff, *Diary of a Nightmare*, 204-205.

Germany in May 1945, this paper will take Berlin, the Reich capital, as a case in point.<sup>31</sup>

By the time its defenders finally surrendered to the Soviets on May 2, Berlin had become little more than “a charred and stinking wreck.”<sup>32</sup> Very few areas of the city had been left untouched by the “ravages of war. Entire districts had been rendered uninhabitable...The streets in between [destroyed buildings] were pitted with craters.” Furthermore, many areas of Berlin, especially the central area around the Reichstag and Reich Chancellery, were “peppered with destroyed military hardware: tanks, anti-tank guns, trucks, and vehicles of all types.”<sup>33</sup> As she traveled around the city for the first time on May 3, the journalist Margret Boveri succinctly summed up the state of Berlin: to her, it was “a scene of indescribable devastation.”<sup>34</sup> Around a week later, when Andreas-Friedrich embarked on her first trip into central Berlin, she noted that the city was nothing but “ruins and dust. Dust and ruins.” To her eyes, the “final six days of fighting [had] destroyed more of Berlin than ten heavy air raids...Only occasionally one spots an intact building.” Nor were buildings the only things destroyed; reaching the Tiergarten, a large, famous park near the Brandenburg Gate, Andreas-Friedrich was shocked and saddened to find that it was nothing more than “torn-up trees. Smashed, blasted, mutilated beyond recognition.”<sup>35</sup> For Boveri, Andreas-Friedrich, and their fellow Berlin women, facing the desolate ruins of their city for the first time only added to their sense of surreality, the feeling that they could not possibly live a normal life in a city that they no longer recognized.

It must not be assumed that this sense of surreality felt by Berlin women caused them to exaggerate the devastated condition of their city, as accounts by outsiders – non-Germans – confirm, or even outdistance, the impressions of diarists such as Andreas-Friedrich and Boveri.

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<sup>31</sup> See Figures 3 and 4 for the destruction of Berlin.

<sup>32</sup> David Clay Large, *Berlin* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 371.

<sup>33</sup> Roger Moorhouse, *Berlin At War* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 382.

<sup>34</sup> Margret Boveri, *Tage des Überlebens. Berlin 1945* (Frankfurt, 1966), 109-100, quoted in Large, *Berlin*, 371.

<sup>35</sup> Andreas-Friedrich, *Battleground Berlin*, 23-24.

Indeed, as he walked around Berlin on May 2, gathering impressions of the defeated city, Vasily Grossman, a Soviet novelist and surprisingly honest correspondent for *Krasnaya Zvezda*, the Red Army's newspaper, was struck by the elemental level of destruction.<sup>36</sup> Despite his considerable literary skill, Grossman admitted that "it's difficult to describe" Berlin, a city where "corpses squashed by tanks, squeezed out like tubes" laid unburied on the streets. Observing the macabre scenes, he wrote that this was "the day of Germany's ruin. In smoke, among the ruins, in flames, amid hundreds of corpses in the streets."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the situation in Berlin had barely improved by July when Australian war correspondent Osmar White arrived in the city. His first impressions of Berlin "convinced [him] that the city was in its death throes" and that "human beings could not continue to live in this horrendous garbage heap."<sup>38</sup> Around the same time, *Life* magazine, which had sent a photographer to Berlin to visually document the city's devastation, noted that "in the center of the town GIs could walk for blocks and see no living thing, hear nothing but the stillness of death, smell nothing but the stench of death."<sup>39</sup>

The true testament to the extent of destruction in Berlin, however, comes from Kardorff, who traveled back to the city in late September 1945. Upon returning to the city where she spent most of the war, a city that was in a condition not much different than that described by Andreas-Friedrich, Boveri, and Grossman in May or White and *Life* in July, she marveled, "so this is Berlin – fascinating and depressing."<sup>40</sup> As she bicycled through central Berlin, Kardorff noted that "nothing remains of the Wilhelmstrasse [the center of government], and the Foreign Office

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<sup>36</sup> Antony Beevor, "Introduction," in Vasily Grossman, *A Writer at War: Vasily Grossman with the Red Army, 1941-1945*, ed. and trans. Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005), xvii.

<sup>37</sup> Vasily Grossman, *A Writer at War: Vasily Grossman with the Red Army, 1941-1945*, ed. and trans. Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005), 338

<sup>38</sup> Osmar White, *Conqueror's Road: An Eyewitness Report of Germany 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 125.

<sup>39</sup> "Berlin: Americans Find Enemy's Capital Bears The Marks of Allied Destruction and Red Army's Occupation," *Life*, July 23, 1945, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Kardorff, *Diary of a Nightmare*, 243.

is in ruins.” Passing the damaged Brandenburg Gate, Kardorff noticed that the “troops of the four occupying Powers walk about and give to this ruined landscape a deceptive air of animation.” Elsewhere, “tanks lie on the pavement, like stranded ships...The Tiergarten, scorched and chaotic, looks like a battlefield.”<sup>41</sup>

It would be amidst the “ruined landscape” of German cities that women attempted to find food and shelter and restore, as much as possible, the rhythms of everyday life, an endeavor that would be greatly complicated by the lack of basic services, such as electricity and running water, considered essential for modern society. Indeed, in the last months and weeks of the war, German infrastructure had been utterly destroyed by both bombing and ground combat. By May 1945, Germany was thus a country in which “many services that people in developed countries tend to take for granted no longer existed: telecommunications, the postal service, the railways, local public transport...gas and electricity supply, and water and fuel supply,” a clear indication that the final months of the war had brought the end of normality.<sup>42</sup>

To consider the case of Berlin further, the Soviet occupiers faced the daunting task of administering a city without power, where people got water from street pumps, and where “smoke from cooking fires emerged from what looked like piles of rubble,” as women were forced to revert to more primitive methods of cooking and heating their damaged homes.<sup>43</sup> For Anonymous, the need to find sufficient clean water for drinking and bathing became a daily problem, one complicated by the fact that the water pump for her street was nearly broken, forcing her to strain “floating splinters and shavings” from the water.<sup>44</sup> A few days later, the fact that “for the first time we have water from a proper hydrant” was cause for celebration for

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 244-245.

<sup>42</sup> Bessel, *Germany 1945*, 63.

<sup>43</sup> Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin*, 419.

<sup>44</sup> Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin*, 172. See Figure 5 for Berlin women using water pumps.



Anonymous, as it represented one step forward in the process of restoring a semblance of normality to her life.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, Andreas-Friedrich noted that the “next [water] pump is three blocks away... We queue up at the end. It’s more than two hours till it’s our turn,” a circumstance that made it immensely difficult for her and her friends to restore a sense of rhythm and order to their daily lives.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, for Andreas-Friedrich, everyday life in the absence of water, electricity, and gas meant that her days were dominated by physical labor: “kindle the fire, gather wood, chop wood, sweep up the rubble. Cleaning up, constantly cleaning up.”<sup>47</sup> As a journalist, unaccustomed to such physical labor, these new rhythms of daily life were a great shock to Andreas-Friedrich, who now lived a life beyond her own control, dominated instead by the need to ensure basic survival, as well as the decisions and actions of the Allied occupiers. Furthermore, even in October 1945, when occupation governments were able to assert greater control over Germany, a continued lack of basic services meant that normality had yet to be fully restored to Andreas-Friedrich’s life. On October 3, she noted that the occupation authorities had ordered the power supply reduced “drastically. Which means power outages...gathering firewood in the ruins,...[and] returning to the brick stove” that she had built in her kitchen in May.<sup>48</sup> Throughout the chaotic year of 1945, therefore, German women sought to reestablish the rhythms of their everyday lives – a semblance of control in the midst of chaos – in their devastated cities and towns, endeavors complicated by the lack of basic services taken for granted in modern societies, such as electricity and running water.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>46</sup> Andreas-Friedrich, *Battleground Berlin*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 96.

## Lack of Food

Beyond the increased bombing and shelling of German cities, and the consequent physical devastation and lack of essential services, the severe lack of food as the Nazi rationing and supply system collapsed in the final weeks of the Second World War also contributed to the feeling among German women that the end of normality was upon them. Just as the lack of running water and electricity greatly disrupted the accustomed rhythms of everyday life by forcing women to spend large parts of their day hauling water from neighborhood pumps and cooking over wood fires, all while battles raged around them, this lack of food ensured that women also spent much of their time searching for food to supplement their slim-to-nonexistent rations. Indeed, throughout Germany “rations were cut repeatedly in early 1945” and some food that theoretically could be bought was in reality no longer available as heavy Allied bombing shattered German infrastructure once and for all.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, in Berlin, due to the Soviet shelling of the city, standing in lines for whatever rations were available or attempting to scrounge supplementary food could quickly turn deadly for women.<sup>50</sup> Despite the danger, many women were not deterred and “simply closed ranks after a shellburst decimated a queue. Nobody dared lose their place,” which makes clear the importance of having any food at all during what promised to be a lengthy battle for the city.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, on April 22, as the Red Army approached Berlin, Anonymous noted that she “waited in the rain for two hours” for what proved to be some of her last official rations. Moreover, she was not alone in doing so, as she noticed that, by the butcher’s shop, there was “an endless line on both sides, people standing four abreast in the pouring rain,” determined to get whatever food they could.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Bessel, *Germany 1945*, 64.

<sup>50</sup> Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin*, 262.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>52</sup> Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin*, 17.

Four days later, with the battle raging and no longer able to come by official rations, Anonymous found herself participating wholeheartedly in the looting of an abandoned Luftwaffe barracks. Anonymous described the scene as one of utter chaos: “All of a sudden I’m in a basement that’s completely pitch-black, full of people panting, shrieking in pain... This isn’t distribution – it’s sheer plunder.” Having got her initial haul safely home, Anonymous ventured out again later that day, after hearing that there were potatoes in the barracks, noting that even though gunfire could clearly be heard, “nobody cares – they’re all gripped by plunder fever.”<sup>53</sup> Despite the dangers involved in such searches for food in the midst of a battle, Anonymous – and many women like her – continued the hunt for food until the battle arrived, quite literally, on their doorsteps. The hunt for food continued both for practical reasons and to assert whatever control they could over their own lives by taking matters of survival into their own hands.

Indeed, on the same day that she looted the barracks, Anonymous wrote that, by braving the artillery fire to search for food and attempting to carry on with their lives in the face of the end of normality, she felt that women now had “a share” in the “privilege of killing and being killed for the fatherland,” which “has transformed us, emboldened us.”<sup>54</sup> Rather than surrender to apathy, as many women believed German men had done, women such as Anonymous instead refused to surrender their sense of control over their lives to the mercy of the war. As inconceivable as standing in line for rations during artillery shelling or unashamedly looting abandoned buildings may be to twenty-first century observers, for German women in 1945 such actions came to symbolize their new status as actors in the conflict raging around them, as they sought to personally ensure their own survival.

Despite the fact that, aside from the cities of Munich and Nürnberg, Bavaria was largely

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 39-41

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 43.

rural in 1945, and thus could potentially have more abundant food resources, the lack of food in the final weeks of the war affected Bavarian women alongside their counterparts in Berlin. Indeed, although rations were cut several times in March and April, because of infrastructure damage, there remained a significant gap between what food was theoretically available and what could actually be delivered to Bavarian villages and towns. Furthermore, in a direct parallel to Berlin women lining up for any available rations in the midst of artillery fire, the “appearance of virtually any food item in [Bavarian] stores resulted in...women forming queues almost instantaneously.”<sup>55</sup> Another parallel to the experience of Berlin women can be found in the case of looting. In Berlin, Anonymous and her fellow women looted abandoned military barracks and bombed-out buildings; in Bavaria, Allied fighter-bombers often shot up food warehouses or supply trains, providing local women with a perfect opportunity to easily gain their much-needed food.<sup>56</sup>

On April 24, a young woman in Aichach, a town in the Swabian district of southwestern Bavaria, observed just such a phenomenon, writing in her diary, “People are acting like they’re crazy...Already in the early morning hours long lines stretched in front of the bakeries and grocery stores...Everyone was walking and running and hurrying.” This need to obtain food before the Americans arrived manifested itself in a near-frenzy, as the woman noted, “One woman was knocked down, but the people just left her lying there and stepped over her.” However, unlike women in Berlin, who stood their ground in the face of shelling, the dangers of war were new enough in Bavaria that the diarist observed that, when “fighter planes returned...the people all ran into each other seeking shelter.”<sup>57</sup> As the account of the woman in

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<sup>55</sup> Fritz, *Endkampf*, 39.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 39

<sup>57</sup> “Tagebuch einer Zwanzigjährigen,” in Erich Kuby, *Ende des Schreckens: Januar bis Mai 1945* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1986), 162-163, quoted in Fritz, *Endkampf*, 39-40.

Aichach makes clear, by the very nature of the contrast between warfare in urban versus rural areas, the search for food in the last weeks of the war was less intense in Bavaria than in Berlin: Bavarian women did not have to venture out in the midst of artillery fire because it was not a near-constant feature of their lives. Indeed, Ursula von Kardorff articulated this contrast in women's experiences upon her return to Berlin in September 1945. When she arrived in the city and was struck by the half-starved, worn out condition of its residents, Kardorff felt shame that Berliners "have been through Hell here while we have been living on the fat of the land in Swabia [i.e. Bavaria]." <sup>58</sup>

However, despite some differences in women's experiences concerning the lack of food between Berlin and Bavaria, one thing that the accounts above make clear is that the need to find adequate food as the Nazi rationing system collapsed, and the actions which resulted from that search, dominated women's lives as a major sign of the end of normality in the spring of 1945. Indeed, when taken in conjunction with the increased bombing and shelling of German cities and towns, and the physical devastation and lack of essential services that subsequently followed, it is no surprise that women often felt as though their world was imploding around them during this period. Faced with the increasing surreality of their lives, German women chose to become actors in their own fates and fought to retain as much control as possible over their lives, rather than passively submit to being at the mercy of the war. The coming sections will explore several ways in which women attempted to accomplish this reassertion of control over their lives, as well as how the actions of Allied troops often severely complicated these endeavors.

### **Attempts to Force Local Surrenders**

Having addressed how bombing and shelling, physical devastation of cities and towns, the lack of basic services, and a severe food shortage contributed to the feeling among German

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<sup>58</sup> Kardorff, *Diary of a Nightmare*, 243.

women that the spring of 1945 had brought with it the end of normality, it is now necessary to examine some of the ways in which these same women fought back and struggled to regain a sense of control over their lives. Additionally, since these efforts often took place at the same time that women first encountered Allied troops, these sections will also explore how the behavior and actions of the newly-arrived Allies (and, at times, the retreating Germans) influenced women's attempts to remain in control of their lives.

One of the most fascinating expressions of German women's transformation into actors occurred in Bavaria, especially in Middle Franconia, a district in the northern part of the state, where there were several instances of German women banding together to push their local party leaders or military commanders to surrender to the oncoming Americans without a fight, thus preserving their homes from destruction. There were two major factors that influenced such attempts by women to force local surrenders in late March and April 1945: Nazi determination to defend every last town or city to the bitter end, and the reign of terror that the Nazis unleashed in the final months of the war. To begin with the former factor, in the war's last months, the Nazi military leadership became fanatically determined to hold onto every last inch of territory they possessed and to fight the Allies to the bitter end, avoiding another November 1918, when Germany surrendered rather than fighting to the death. However, given the Allies' overwhelming military strength, such "attempts to hold a city or town 'to the last bullet' did little more than to ensure its destruction."<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, at the same time that the Nazi leadership determined to fight to the bitter end, they also took action to ensure that German civilians would do the same, unlike November 1918, when the war-weary homefront supposedly stabbed the German army in the back by

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<sup>59</sup> Bessel, *Germany 1945*, 38, 135.

surrendering before Germany had been defeated in battle.<sup>60</sup> Consequently, on February 15, 1945, the Reich Ministry of Justice authorized the creation of summary courts-martial “in areas of the Reich endangered by the enemy and threatening their use against individuals deemed guilty of cowardice...[or] undermining the war effort.” For those convicted, the death sentence was the only acceptable punishment.<sup>61</sup> Thus, by attempting to protect their homes from destruction by armies ordered to fight to the death, Bavarian women took huge risks and acted courageously in the face of the reign of terror unleashed by the Nazis in the final months of the war. For some, this transformation into actors would end – or nearly end – tragically.

Events in Obernbreit, a village southeast of Würzburg in the district of Lower Franconia, provide an illustration of this sudden transformation of women into actors in response to their desire to protect their homes and families, as well as the Nazi leadership’s insane determination to fight to the death. With the Americans within firing range of the village, Obernbreit was heavily shelled on the morning of April 4. That evening, hoping to avert further destruction of their homes, a delegation of women went to see the local Wehrmacht commander, demanding that he withdraw all Wehrmacht troops from the village and begin hanging white flags throughout the town. Rather than accept the women’s demands, which he likely believed fell under the category of “undermining the war effort,” the commander ordered the women to disperse, threatening to shoot every fifth woman in town if they did not immediately obey. The next day, after the commander’s dead body was found on the railroad tracks, Wehrmacht troops left Obernbreit.<sup>62</sup> Even though the women of Obernbreit may not have been immediately successful in their demands, their actions displayed a powerful determination to end the war on

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>61</sup> Fritz, *Endkampf*, 117-118

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 99.

their terms, rather than those of the Wehrmacht or the Americans.<sup>63</sup> In doing so, they transformed from passive victims into actors, hoping to control the war, rather than let it control their lives.

Similarly, women in Ochsenfurt, a city just west of Obernbreit, also acted to protect their homes and end the war on their own terms. On March 29, a group of women arrived at local Nazi party headquarters to demand that the party leaders surrender Ochsenfurt to the Americans without a fight; however, many of these leaders were faithful Nazis determined to obey the command to fight until the end and refused the women's demands. Undeterred by the intransigence of the party leaders, other local women began, on their own initiative, to "dismantle tank obstacles erected at the entrances to the city." Faced with an open disregard of their authority, Ochsenfurt's party leaders arrested three of the "rebellious" women; charged with "undermining the war effort," they were quickly tried, convicted, and sentenced to hang on April 1 (ironically, Easter Sunday). Luckily for these women, American troops arrived in Ochsenfurt before their sentences could be carried out.<sup>64</sup> While events in Ochsenfurt and Obernbreit highlight both the willingness of Nazi leaders on all levels to utilize terror to keep civilians fighting and the courageous determination of women to control their own fates, nowhere were these opposing positions made clearer than in Bad Windsheim, where women's actions to protect their homes escalated into a deadly situation involving the Gestapo.

Before the events of April 12-13, Bad Windsheim, a city in Middle Franconia west of Nürnberg, had already been the scene of controversy between civilians determined to protect the town and its military commander, Major Reinbrecht, who was ordered to hold the city "to the

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<sup>63</sup> I use the term "end the war" because, in a real sense, one's war ended when the Allies arrived in one's town, or in the case of Berlin, on one's street. Thus, the final surrender on May 8 often went unremarked, partially due to the breakdown in communications (some did not hear of it for a few days) and also because basic survival was uppermost in German civilians' minds during these first days of occupation.

<sup>64</sup> Fritz, *Endkampf*, 120.



last.” On the morning of April 12, seeing the town’s anti-tank barricades still standing and knowing that the Americans were close to the city, the women of Bad Windsheim “met spontaneously...and talked anxiously of ways to prevent the destruction of their town.”<sup>65</sup> Like the women of Obernbreit or Ochsenfurt, they decided to assemble in the Marktplatz, the central square, with their children, and appeal to Major Reinbrecht’s humanitarian side. That evening, around three hundred people – mainly women – gathered in the Marktplatz, prompting one observer to label the demonstration a “Weibersturm,” or women’s storm, an unintentionally ironic play on the Volkssturm (people’s militia). After hearing that the city’s mayor had threatened to shoot the women who pled with him to surrender the town, the crowd in the Marktplatz turned hostile. Both Reinbrecht and a decorated local soldier, Sergeant Angel, attempted to calm the crowd, but, signifying their frustration with leaders all-too-willing to sacrifice their homes for a now-futile cause, the women hurled abuse at both Reinbrecht and Angel before Reinbrecht finally managed to disperse the crowd by falsely reporting that fighter-bombers were approaching.<sup>66</sup> Although the women of Bad Windsheim had failed to convince Reinbrecht to surrender and spare their town, their actions demonstrated their desire to reassert control over their lives and influence the end of the war (as with the women in Ochsenfurt and Obernbreit), as well as the extent of their pent-up hostility against officials willing to go along with the Nazi leaders’ fanatical vision of a fight to the death.

However, the case of the Weibersturm of Bad Windsheim did not end there. Someone – the informant was never identified – reported to Gestapo headquarters in Nürnberg that the Weibersturm had been organized and led by Christine Schmotzer, the wife of a local factory owner, who had, in actuality, not been involved with the protest. Determined to punish

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 140-142.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 142-144.

Schmotzer for “undermining the war effort,” despite the fact that American troops were just miles from Bad Windsheim, the regional Gestapo sent *SS-Untersturmführer* (Lieutenant) Schmid to “exact ‘justice.’” Arriving in Bad Windsheim in the evening of April 13, with orders to shoot “a few of them [the Weibersturm’s leaders]” and “blow up their houses with hand grenades,” Schmid immediately set off to find Christine Schmotzer. Finding her outside of her home, Schmid accused Schmotzer of leading the demonstration. Although she denied the charge, Schmid pulled out his revolver and shot her in the neck as she attempted to flee, then shot her in the mouth and left eye at point-blank range, all in front of her husband and daughter. Schmid then left a placard on her body that read “A traitor has been executed.”<sup>67</sup> Two days later, American troops entered Bad Windsheim without resistance.<sup>68</sup> If the beginning of the Weibersturm episode indicated the depth of women’s determination to reassert control over their lives by influencing the end of the war, as well as their deep hostility toward Nazi officials taking that control away by fanatically and futilely continuing to fight, the Weibersturm’s tragic end demonstrates the extent to which women’s transformation into actors threatened the Nazi system, causing them to furiously try to turn women back into passive victims. While their attempts to end the war on their own terms pitted Bavarian women against Nazi officials in the struggle to remain in control of their lives, the arrival of the Allies and the coming of occupation would soon transform this struggle into one between German women and Allied soldiers.

### **The Question of Collective Guilt**

Despite being a concept, rather than a physical circumstance that German women struggled against in order to restore control over their lives, the Allied belief that Germans should bear a collective guilt for the crimes of the Nazis nevertheless had an impact upon

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 145-146.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 47.

German women's search for control over their lives as the Second World War gave way to Allied occupation. By asserting collective guilt, the Allies assumed all Germans to be part of an undifferentiated mass, thus causing women to lose their sense of individual identity, as the Allies appeared quite ready to treat them in the same manner as all other Germans. When women pushed back against the idea of collective guilt, they thus struggled to preserve their own individual identities and, most importantly, their feeling that, as individuals, they could control their own fates, rather than being subject to a collective fate imposed by the Allies.

While not a new idea, the feeling that all Germans should bear the guilt for the crimes of the Nazis gained many adherents as Allied troops entered the heart of Germany and began liberating concentration camps, especially among American GIs, who did not have the same firsthand experience with SS and Wehrmacht crimes that Soviet soldiers did. Indeed, already in the summer of 1942, Soviet propagandist Ilya Ehrenburg had notoriously asserted in an article for *Krasnaya Zvezda*, the Red Army newspaper, that the "Germans are not human beings...If you have not killed at least one German a day, you have wasted that day...Do not count days; do not count miles. Count only the number of Germans you have killed."<sup>69</sup> In contrast to this extreme Soviet hatred of the Germans and absolute belief in their collective guilt, many GIs "fought the Germans with little hatred or moral indignation" until the point where they came face-to-face with concentration camps and forced laborers, the evidence of Nazi crimes.<sup>70</sup> Because of this initial reluctance to hate the Germans, the U.S. Army in late 1944 issued the *Pocket Guide to Germany*, which informed GIs about Germany and presented "the Germans" as a collectively guilty mass. The *Pocket Guide* instructed American troops that "the Germans have sinned against the laws of humanity and cannot come back into the civilized fold merely

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<sup>69</sup> Fritz, *Ostkrieg*, 274.

<sup>70</sup> Fritz, *Endkampf*, 50.

by...saying – ‘I’m sorry,’” reminded them that the Nazi wartime conquests were “enthusiastically and energetically supported by the German people,” and urged them to remain aloof in their dealings with Germans.<sup>71</sup> As Allied troops, both Soviet, American, and British, began occupying Germany, they would put these ideas about collective guilt and “the Germans” into practice, thus bringing them into conflict with German women attempting to preserve their individual identities and avoid being subject to a collective fate imposed upon Germany.

For German women, the Allies’ focus on collective guilt quickly came to the forefront, often within the first weeks of occupation. Indeed, on May 18, after marveling at the fact that, because the electricity was back on in a nearby district, it was possible to listen to British radio again, Ruth Andreas-Friedrich found her enthusiasm for the radio quickly tempered by the “sharp voice...speaking against us. More sharply than we ever expected.” Genuinely puzzled and somewhat defensive due to her wartime service in an anti-Nazi resistance group, Andreas-Friedrich asked the question, “Do they really want to blame us wholesale for the crimes of our government?” before wondering whether, because so many top Nazis committed suicide, “will it only be the little fish that get caught?”<sup>72</sup> In the British zone, on May 27, Mathilde Wolff-Mönckeberg, the wife of a Hamburg professor, addressed similar questions in her diary, writing that “our enemies accuse *all* of us, without exception, of being criminals, fully responsible for what has happened.”<sup>73</sup> Wolff-Mönckeberg, like Andreas-Friedrich, clearly chafed at the Allies’ insistence that all Germans were equally guilty, feeling that such assertions negated her sense of individual identity by lumping her in with people like Hitler, Goebbels, or Himmler. However, while she wrote that “ultimately, I am sure we [the Germans and the Allies] can work together,”

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<sup>71</sup> Army Service Forces, Information and Education Division, *Pocket Guide to Germany* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944), <http://digitalcollections.smu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/hgp/id/686>, 4-5.

<sup>72</sup> Andreas-Friedrich, *Battleground Berlin*, 30.

<sup>73</sup> Mathilde Wolff-Mönckeberg, *On the Other Side: Letters to My Children from Germany 1940-46*, trans. Ruth Evans (London: Persephone Books, 2011), 144.

Wolff-Mönckeberg believed that, in the meantime, there was nothing for Germans to do but “bear the yoke,” as it would take time for so-called “good” Germans to convince the Allies that all Germans had not been fanatical Nazis.<sup>74</sup>

In Bavaria, part of the American zone of occupation, Ursula von Kardorff first noted the Allies’ attitude toward collective guilt when her village was occupied by American and Free French troops. As she spoke with a Free French officer, who was “full of hatred for the Germans and everything to do with them,” Kardorff attempted to explain that “the matter was not as simple” as he believed it to be, telling him that her “friends had been hanged by Hitler...that there had also been Germans in the concentration camps.” While the officer did become “increasingly friendly,” he ended the conversation by remarking that he pitied Germans such as her, to which Kardorff reflected, “we can really do without pity.”<sup>75</sup> For her part, Kardorff wanted neither to be treated as part of an undifferentiated mass of Germans, nor to be pitied for what had happened to Germany; rather, she wanted to be treated as an individual, a person trying to make her way in a chaotic world.

By early June, Kardorff’s annoyance with the idea of collective guilt had only increased, as she remarked that the “Allies no longer threaten to bomb us, but now they talk to us like a governess.”<sup>76</sup> Believing both in the collective guilt of all Germans for the crimes of the Nazis and that German militarism had caused both world wars, the Americans, who governed Bavaria, sought to transform the Germans into democrats, so as to “cleanse the country of Nazism and militarism.”<sup>77</sup> However, Kardorff felt such attempts were heavy-handed, akin to “sitting in a

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 145

<sup>75</sup> Kardorff, *Diary of a Nightmare*, 214.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>77</sup> Bessel, *Germany 1945*, 281.

classroom and being continually rapped over the knuckles.”<sup>78</sup> With such a broad-based effort to transform an entire people, Kardorff believed that the Allies lost sight of the fact that the Germans were individuals as well, some of whom had opposed the Nazis and favored democracy. In the end, the Allied belief in the collective guilt of the Germans, who were treated as a homogeneous mass, caused women to feel a loss of individual identity. Rather than passively subject themselves to a collective fate imposed by the Allies, German women pushed back as best they could, attempting to make Allied troops understand that they were individuals who wished to control their own fates. Particularly in the American zone, as the chaos of the initial weeks of occupation gave way to a more stable governing framework and as German women’s transformation into actors often resulted in closer relationships with individual GIs – as will be discussed later – American ideas about collective guilt would begin to change. As will be seen in greater detail later, the actions of German women thus could truly shape the direction of the occupation of Germany.

### **The Trauma of Rape**

With regard to the rapes of German women by Allied troops, particularly the mass rapes of women in Berlin carried out by Soviet soldiers, the violent behavior of newly-occupying Allied troops greatly – and often traumatically – influenced women’s attempts to retain a sense of control over their lives. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus upon the mass rapes carried out by Soviet soldiers in Berlin in late April and early May 1945. This is not to ignore the fact that some French, British, and American troops certainly were guilty of raping German women in their respective zones of occupation, as the French army, especially, “behaved with savage indiscipline ... in some places perpetrating excesses on an almost Soviet scale.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Kardorff, *Diary of a Nightmare*, 224.

<sup>79</sup> Max Hastings, *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany, 1944-1945* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 431.

Indeed, after French troops occupied Freudenstadt in the Black Forest on April 17, “three days of looting, arson, and violence ensued,” after which as many as 500 women reported having been raped by French soldiers.<sup>80</sup>

In the American zone, including Bavaria, GIs generally were less guilty of raping German women than their French and Soviet counterparts. This is not to say that American soldiers were innocent of rape, as evidenced by the report of a Civil Affairs officer with the U.S. 30<sup>th</sup> Division, in which he noted “There were ... a number of rape cases” reported by German civilians to American occupation authorities.<sup>81</sup> However, as will be explored in greater detail in the next section, because of a number of factors, including the food crisis in Germany and the relative material wealth of GIs, sexual relationships between German women and American troops more often took the form of fraternization (itself a morally ambiguous concept at times), rather than outright rape. Ultimately, because nothing – even the actions of the French – truly resembling the orgy of mass rapes of German women by Soviet soldiers occurred in the western occupation zones, this paper will focus on Berlin to truly understand the effect of the trauma of rape upon women’s search for agency in the spring of 1945.<sup>82</sup>

Carried out during the chaos of defeat and the onset of occupation, the mass rapes of German women by Red Army troops in Berlin were highly traumatic experiences both for the victims of sexual assault and those who experienced it secondhand, as the randomness and brutality of the rapes destroyed women’s sense that they had any semblance of control over their lives. Unable to predict when – or if – they would be raped and unable to effectively defend

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<sup>80</sup> Bessel, *Germany 1945*, 158.

<sup>81</sup> Hastings, *Armageddon*, 428.

<sup>82</sup> See Miriam Gebhardt, *Als die Soldaten kamen: Die Vergewaltigung deutscher Frauen am Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2015) for the latest study of the rape of German women by Allied troops in the western zones of occupation.

themselves against armed, often drunk Soviet troops, German women found themselves reduced to passive, helpless victims, dependent on the actions of Red Army soldiers to determine the course of their lives. However, despite their traumatic experiences, many women in Berlin did not abandon the struggle to become actors and determine their own fates, and, consequently, found ways in which to restore as much control as possible over their lives. The coming sections will explore both the trauma of rape for women in Berlin, as well as the ways in which some women managed to transform themselves from victims to actors despite the circumstances.

The context for the mass rapes of late April and early May 1945 was the Soviets' campaign of violent revenge against German civilians, which had commenced as soon as the Red Army crossed into German territory. Soviet soldiers sought to avenge not only the crimes that the SS and Wehrmacht had carried out on Soviet soil, but also the brutal, bitter fighting of the first months of 1945, which killed hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers after the Nazis had clearly lost the war.<sup>83</sup> Especially in the ruins of Berlin, where the destructiveness of the final battle ensured that it would take time to restore order and where the Soviets governed alone until July 1945, Red Army troops for a period of time had the "opportunity to do what they liked to German civilians" without penalties from their commanders.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, German authorities inadvertently provided the perfect impetus for the mass rapes to begin, as they failed to destroy Berlin's alcohol stocks, believing that drunk Soviet soldiers would not fight effectively. Unfortunately for the women of Berlin, the readily available alcohol instead further inflamed Red Army troops already thirsting for revenge against Germans, soldiers who quickly chose to take their drunken hatred out on German women.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, a woman interviewed in July 1945 by Australian journalist Osmar White emphasized the fact that "they [the Soviets] were drunk.

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<sup>83</sup> Bessel, *Germany 1945*, 152.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>85</sup> Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin*, 409.



They had bottles of brandy and wine and they were excited.” She also noted that, even as the occupation matured, the Soviet “troops would get drunk at night and the trouble would start up all over again.”<sup>86</sup> After the alcohol- and revenge-fueled orgy of sexual violence had finally calmed down, hospitals estimated that anywhere from 95,000 to 130,000 women had been raped in Berlin. Furthermore, a large minority – perhaps even a majority – of victims had been raped multiple times.<sup>87</sup>

Among the women in Berlin who faced the trauma of mass rape and the subsequent loss of control over their lives were Anonymous and Ruth Andreas-Friedrich. Despite the fact that they lived in different districts of the city, Andreas-Friedrich and Anonymous both noted the speed with which Soviet soldiers transformed themselves from conquerors focused on securing the city into feared sexual aggressors, at times within the space of one day. Anonymous first encountered Soviet soldiers when they arrived on her street on the morning of April 27. Watching the soldiers ride looted bicycles up and down the street, Anonymous felt some relief that they were, in fact, “only men,” not the wild beasts of Nazi propaganda, a relief which vanished that evening, when Soviet soldiers broke into the basement of her apartment block looking for women. On that first night, Anonymous was raped three times and faced many more sexual assaults over the next few days, before she began to reassert herself and begin the transition from helpless victim to actor.<sup>88</sup>

Elsewhere in Berlin, on April 30, Andreas-Friedrich awoke in the middle of the night to find a “flashlight...shining into [her] face” and a Soviet soldier saying “good woman...come,” as he attempted to rape her. Luckily for Andreas-Friedrich, who screamed for help, one of her male friends arrived in time to prevent the rape. As he spoke Russian, he proceeded to drink with the

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<sup>86</sup> White, *Conquerors' Road*, 129-130.

<sup>87</sup> Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin*, 410.

<sup>88</sup> Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin*, 48, 53.

local Soviet troops for the rest of the night to keep them away from Andreas-Friedrich, her twenty-year-old daughter, and the other women of their group.<sup>89</sup> Although Andreas-Friedrich was extremely fortunate to have not become a victim of rape, she still felt the sense of helplessness that resulted from the mass rapes, as she realized that she was completely dependent upon her male friends to protect her – that there was little she could do to protect herself – and that, should they not be around, she could easily become the next victim of Soviet sexual violence.

The feeling among German women that they were nothing more than passive, helpless victims, dependent on the actions of Red Army soldiers to determine the course of their lives, resulted not only from the randomness of the rapes, but also the nature of Soviet soldiers' processes of selecting women, which often fostered in women the sense that they were nothing but helpless prey. In many instances, Soviet troops would "return at night to search buildings where they had seen women during the day," thus narrowing down the time they had to spend searching for their "human prey."<sup>90</sup> This feeling of being prey, as well as the sheer randomness of the rapes, was further reinforced by the fact that most soldiers selected their victims based on physical appearance. Indeed, the Soviets tended to prefer younger, blond women; additionally, women who were plumper were selected more often, as the soldiers believed they were healthier than more slender women.<sup>91</sup> If this realization that whether they would be raped or not often depended upon the personal preferences of the Soviet troops did not contribute enough to German women's sense of helplessness in the face of the mass rapes, the fact that some women were given up by their peers only added to this feeling. When she returned to Berlin in September 1945, Kardorff heard just such a story from an acquaintance of hers, who attempted

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<sup>89</sup> Andreas-Friedrich, *Battleground Berlin*, 10.

<sup>90</sup> Moorhouse, *Berlin At War*, 377.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

to hide from the Soviets behind a pile of coal, but was “given away by a woman who hoped to save her own daughter.” Having then been raped by “twenty-three soldiers one after the other,” Kardorff’s acquaintance likely felt more than the usual share of helplessness: not only had she become a victim of the Soviets, but she had been thrust into the position of prey by one of her fellow women.<sup>92</sup>

However, in spite of the trauma of the mass rapes and the almost-overwhelming sense of helplessness, many women in Berlin did not abandon the struggle to remain actors and, as a result, found ways in which to restore as much control as possible over their lives. For many women, the behavior and preferences of the Soviet soldiers provided the impetus for their transformation into actors, as they learned the most effective ways to defend themselves by tricking and outwitting Red Army troops looking for women. Discovering that many Soviets preferred young, attractive, healthy women, the female residents of Berlin “adopted the widespread practice of making themselves as unattractive as possible” by whatever means were at their disposal. Furthermore, some women pretended to be ill with contagious diseases, while others, especially young girls and teenagers, pretended they were boys by cutting their hair short and wearing pants.<sup>93</sup> One young woman, determined not to be raped after having escaped selection by soldiers several times, took the deception even further: she faked insanity in order to scare any potential rapists off.<sup>94</sup> Beyond tricks and deceptions such as these, some courageous women who refused to be made passive and helpless attempted to fight off their attackers. When Gisela Stange, a sixteen-year-old nurse, was trapped and attacked by a Soviet soldier, she kicked him in the groin as hard as she could. In retaliation, he and another soldier beat her savagely, knocking out several of her teeth, until an officer appeared and stopped them. Despite her

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<sup>92</sup> Kardorff, *Diary of a Nightmare*, 247.

<sup>93</sup> Moorhouse, *Berlin At War*, 379.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

injuries, Stange had escaped being raped, thinking to herself, “I have at least preserved my honour.”<sup>95</sup>

In other cases, women in Berlin realized that they had to take more permanent measures in order to restore a semblance of control and stability to their lives, measures that took the form of establishing a sexual relationship with one Soviet soldier – preferably an officer – who would keep other soldiers from raping them and provide them with much-needed food. One woman who chose this route was Anonymous, who, having been raped multiple times, realized the need to restore a measure of control to her life by finding “a single wolf to keep away the pack.”<sup>96</sup> Acting in accordance with this resolution, Anonymous established a relationship with a Red Army major in early May who she wrote was “the most bearable” of “all the male beasts I’ve seen these past few days.”<sup>97</sup> Despite her determination to escape the mass rapes, Anonymous struggled with the morality of essentially prostituting herself, admitting that “by no means could it be said that the major is raping me ... I am placing myself at his service of my own accord.” Acknowledging that prostitution “goes against my nature ... destroys my pride – and makes me physically miserable,” Anonymous wrote that she would be “overjoyed” when she could again “earn [her] bread in some more pleasant way better suited to [her] pride.”<sup>98</sup>

This being said, Anonymous also realized the short-term benefits of her arrangement with the major, confessing openly that she was doing it for “bacon, butter, sugar, candles, [and] canned meat,” not wanting to continue to “sponge off” the widow with whom she lived. Being able to provide food for their household – by whatever means – enabled Anonymous to “feel

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>96</sup> Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin*, 64.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 115, 117.

more independent” and less reliant upon others for her continued survival.<sup>99</sup> In the context of early postwar Berlin, Anonymous’s case was by no means out of the ordinary, as she herself recognized, noting in early May that “the unbridled raping sprees of the first few days are over...I hear that other women have done the same thing I have, that they’re now spoken for and therefore taboo.”<sup>100</sup> Indeed, as the Soviet occupation forces settled in, many Red Army officers took German “occupation wives,” entering into increasingly long-standing versions of Anonymous’s relationship with the major, especially as the lack of food in Berlin remained acute.<sup>101</sup>

Having explored both the reduction of women in Berlin to helpless victims of the Soviet mass rapes, as well as the ways in which some women, such as Anonymous, managed to reassert a degree of control over their lives and become actors again, it is important to note that women’s experiences in Berlin in late April and early May 1945 – as well as the continuation of these abuses long after the early days of occupation – engendered a deep and often long-lasting hostility on the part of German civilians toward their Soviet occupiers. The mass rapes, both as traumatic experiences of random, brutal sexual assault and as symbols of their helplessness, created great antipathy on the part of both German women and German men toward the troops of the Red Army specifically and the Soviet occupation in general. Andreas-Friedrich summed up this feeling, noting in late May that, in the “last months under the Nazis nearly all of us [i.e. anti-Nazis] were pro-Russian. We waited for the light from the East. But it has burned too many.” Rather than bringing liberation, Soviet actions instead caused the streets of Berlin to “resonate every night with the piercing screams of women in distress.”<sup>102</sup> A few weeks later, Andreas-

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>101</sup> Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin*, 414.

<sup>102</sup> Andreas-Friedrich, *Battleground Berlin*, 36.

Friedrich again addressed the hostility toward the Soviets, relating a conversation with a male friend, in which he wondered if “Stalin knows what’s at stake here...Our conquerors will lose the game not through war, but through their behavior in peace.” While Soviet propaganda could insist that “Russia is paradise and Bolshevism is heaven on earth,” women will “think of those who raped them and will answer: No! And no power on earth will be able to change their minds.”<sup>103</sup>

Indeed, the higher Soviet occupation authorities soon realized the extent of the damage to Soviet-German relations the rapes had caused and began to assert control over their troops in late May and early June 1945.<sup>104</sup> Despite these measures, Soviet rapes of German women could not immediately – or easily – be stopped, as each succeeding wave of occupation troops arriving in Berlin simply followed the example of their predecessors.<sup>105</sup> As late as August 1945, after the arrival of the Americans and British in Berlin, the Red Army was still attempting to control its soldiers, issuing ever-stricter regulations against “robbery,” “physical violence,” and “scandalous events.”<sup>106</sup> In addition to these attempts to control their army, the Soviet occupiers also sped up the rate at which they restored basic services – electricity, running water, and gas – in Berlin, realizing that they desperately needed to improve their image with the city’s residents and hoping that restoring a sense of normality to Berliners’ daily lives would do the trick. Indeed, Anonymous reported new, more generous ration allotments on May 14, the restoration of running water on May 19, and the return of electricity on May 27, all within one month of the city’s surrender.<sup>107</sup> For Anonymous, while such advances could not make up for the trauma of

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>104</sup> Large, *Berlin*, 374; Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 90.

<sup>105</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 90.

<sup>106</sup> Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin*, 413.

<sup>107</sup> Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin*, 177, 198, 223.

being raped, having to prostitute herself to survive, and being forced to clear rubble, she did appreciate having a semblance of increased control over the rhythms of daily life return along with “these technological wonders, these achievements of the modern age.”<sup>108</sup> In the end, by making such concessions, the Soviet authorities demonstrated that the experiences and actions of women had an impact on the direction of their occupation of Germany. As will be seen in greater detail in the next section, the actions of women seeking to control their own lives would significantly influence the direction of American occupation policy.

### **The Development of Fraternization**

In contrast to Berlin, where women experienced the trauma of mass rape and, consequently, had to struggle to regain control over their lives and transform themselves from victims into actors, for most German women in Bavaria, the onset of occupation usually did not involve the same descent into helplessness. Rather, Bavarian women began quite early in the occupation period to search for stability and normalcy as part of their attempts to regain control over their lives. This search for agency and control on the part of Bavarian women in many cases led them to form relationships with GIs, in what American occupation authorities termed “fraternization.” For reasons that will be explored in this section, fraternization – officially banned – soon became a major issue for the American occupation government, to the point that the actions of German women seeking to control their own lives ultimately resulted in a major reversal of U.S. occupation policy. Moreover, as such relationships between German women and GIs developed, the connections made between the two groups would also come to alter American attitudes about the collective guilt of the Germans for the crimes of the Nazis.

Interestingly, the context for the development of fraternization in Bavaria – and, indeed, the entire American zone of occupation – was its complete ban by American military authorities

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 198.

as early as 1944.<sup>109</sup> Although fraternization later came to mean, almost exclusively, sexual relationships between German women and American GIs, the ban on fraternization was initially envisioned to prevent all contacts of a personal nature between U.S. soldiers and German civilians. Indeed, GIs could not visit the homes of Germans, shake hands with them, take part in any social event with them, or walk with them on the streets; furthermore, Germans could not live in a building in which American troops were quartered.<sup>110</sup> The ban on fraternization was intended to be both a security measure (American authorities were extremely concerned about guerilla activity), a way in which to emphasize the complete defeat of Germany by keeping American troops in the position of aloof conquerors, and a demonstration to Germans of their collective guilt for Nazi crimes by punishing all Germans.<sup>111</sup> However, soon after the end of the war and the beginning of occupation, the ban on fraternization between GIs and German civilians quickly began to break down. Indeed, having been warned by the *Pocket Guide* that “You are in *enemy* country! These people are not *our* allies or our friends,” American soldiers were happily surprised to find that many German women were quite willing to form relationships with them.<sup>112</sup>

Why were German women willing to form relationships with occupying GIs? One major factor behind the development of fraternization was that GIs, like Anonymous’s Soviet major, were able to provide German women with much-needed food to supplement their “meager official rations,” which often helped both the women and their families avoid starvation in a Germany plagued by the lack of food.<sup>113</sup> By fraternizing with American soldiers, German

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<sup>109</sup> Earl Ziemke, *The U.S. Army in the Occupation of Germany 1944-1946* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1990), 321.

<sup>110</sup> Bessel, *Germany 1945*, 178.

<sup>111</sup> Petra Goedde, *GIs and Germans: Culture, Gender, and Foreign Relations, 1945-1949* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 46.

<sup>112</sup> *Pocket Guide to Germany*, 4.

<sup>113</sup> Fritz, *Endkampf*, 207-208.



women were able to gain back some control over their lives, as they refused to be dependent on the official rations issued by American occupation authorities, and, instead, took action to ensure their survival. Beyond much-needed food, fraternizing with GIs also offered German women “the chance to live again,” after years of men being away at war and months of living through the chaos of the end of normality. Indeed, one woman noted that, in contrast to injured, emaciated German men, the GIs were “healthy, clean, well-fed,” not “crippled in some way” like so many German men after the years of war.<sup>114</sup> Because it thus offered the chance for German women to once again have personal lives not controlled by the demands of the war and to feel some independence in being able to provide for their families, fraternization was an important aspect of women’s search for control over their lives during the initial months of the Allied occupation of Germany.

Because many women in Bavaria and the American occupation zone as a whole found fraternization to be rewarding, liberating, or both, it soon became an extremely widespread practice, one inviting comment from both other German women, other German civilians, and American occupation authorities. Indeed, as early as June 1945, fraternization had already become a common practice, as Ursula von Kardorff found when she met an American soldier willing to teach her English in exchange for learning German. However, Kardorff soon realized his true motivation, noting that “he only wanted to know what ‘love’ was in German and talked about nothing but ‘fraternization’...After I had declined his cigarettes and chocolate he did not even turn up for a second lesson.”<sup>115</sup> Kardorff’s anecdote clearly indicates that, regardless of what official U.S. occupation policy stated, the ban on fraternization had broken down barely a month into occupation, as American soldiers actively searched for German women willing to

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>115</sup> Kardorff, *Diary of a Nightmare*, 226.

form relationships with them.

Realizing that fraternization could not be stopped through penalties or restrictions, neither of which had had any effect on the behavior of GIs and German women, in mid-July 1945, American occupation authorities relented, allowing fraternization in public places, followed by the abolition of the ban entirely in October.<sup>116</sup> Although the actions of GIs were certainly responsible for this major reversal of American occupation policy, it should rightly be seen as an instance where the actions of German women seeking control over their lives directly influenced the direction of the Allied occupation of Germany. While American soldiers may have made the first moves in the development of fraternization, the practice would not have become so widespread and so much of an issue that U.S. authorities were forced to alter occupation policy if German women – in spite of the fact that fraternization for food often approached prostitution – had not been willing to form relationships with GIs, thus changing the direction of American occupation policy.

As fraternization developed in the American zone of occupation, the actions of German women also began to change American ideas about the collective guilt of the Germans, following earlier attempts to make Allied troops understand that they were individuals who wished to control their own fates, not a homogeneous people willing to be subject to a collective fate imposed by the Allies. Indeed, it was not until the development of fraternization that German women experienced great success in getting Allied, specifically American, troops to realize that Germany was not “a monolithic militaristic society.”<sup>117</sup> When German women formed relationships with American soldiers, who thus became acquainted and friendly with individual Germans, a new attitude toward collective guilt developed, in which most GIs still

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<sup>116</sup> Ziemke, *The U.S. Army in the Occupation of Germany*, 325, 327.

<sup>117</sup> Goedde, *GIs and Germans*, 46.

“held Germans collectively responsible for the war but absolved the Germans they knew from individual guilt.”<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, this change in American soldiers’ ideas about the collective guilt of the Germans eventually influenced American occupation policy as a whole, as the “military government began to distinguish between ‘guilty’ and ‘innocent’ Germans.”<sup>119</sup> Less than six months into the occupation, the actions of German women had thus resulted in another transformation of U.S. occupation policy, sending the American occupation of Germany down a new path, one that would eventually result in the political reconciliation of Americans and Germans.<sup>120</sup> Begun as part of German women’s search for control over their lives by acting to ensure their survival and building personal lives not dominated by the war, fraternization had thus ultimately resulted in two major reversals of American occupation policy: the end of the ban on fraternization, and a decisive change in American attitudes toward the collective guilt of the Germans.

## Conclusion

As the Allied occupation of Germany developed in the months following its chaotic beginning in the spring and summer of 1945, the hardships faced by German women only increased, as food rations hovered near starvation levels, millions of civilians remained homeless, and German men were largely absent from society, either dead, still prisoners of war, or too physically or psychologically incapacitated to work.<sup>121</sup> Faced with the responsibility of providing for their families, some women volunteered to work as heavy laborers, tasked with removing rubble from German cities, in order to gain access to better ration cards. Other women, particularly those with Nazi backgrounds, were compelled by occupation authorities to

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>121</sup> Elizabeth Heineman, “The Hour of the Woman: Memories of Germany’s ‘Crisis Years’ and West German National Identity,” *American Historical Review* 101, no. 2 (1996): 374.

become Trümmerfrauen, or “women of the rubble.”<sup>122</sup> Whatever their motivations for becoming part of the project of German reconstruction, these Trümmerfrauen became, over time, the enduring symbol of Germany’s (especially the future West Germany’s) recovery from the devastation of 1945. As Germans faced complicated questions about the Nazi past, the symbolic Trümmerfrau was not linked to a political past. Rather, she “came from nowhere to clean up the mess others had left behind,” representing the wishes of many Germans to put the past behind them, rebuild, and get on with their lives, a process that could only begin by clearing away – quite literally – the rubble of Nazi Germany.<sup>123</sup> Because the figure of the Trümmerfrau thus offered Germans the opportunity to celebrate reconstruction and recovery with no strings attached – no memories of mass rapes or morally problematic choices, for instance – it was the Trümmerfrauen, not the fiercely determined women of 1945 and their struggle for agency, who “came to personify West Germany’s reconstruction” in the national consciousness.<sup>124</sup>

While the importance of the Trümmerfrauen for West German national identity and memory of the postwar period is undeniable, it is equally important not to neglect the experiences of German women during the chaotic year of 1945. Indeed, in the spring of 1945, as Allied armies conquered Germany from both east and west, the Nazi regime collapsed, and the ferocity of the final weeks of fighting left the country in ruins, German women came face-to-face with the destructive power of war. Confronted with immense chaos in all aspects of their lives, women sought, as best they could, to retain a sense of agency in their lives and influence their own fates as the world imploded around them. These complex struggles formed the heart of this paper’s examination of the multifaceted experiences of German women at the end of the Second World War and the effects such experiences had upon the development of the Allied occupation

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 374-375.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 376.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 378.

of Germany throughout 1945. After exploring the attempts of women in Berlin and Bavaria to preserve as much agency in their lives as possible in a conquered country, this paper demonstrated that German women fought to transform themselves from victims to actors in whatever manner they could, a struggle that shaped both their perceptions of and the direction of the Allied occupation of Germany.

In the face of the immense chaos of the spring of 1945, it is little surprise that German women confronted what amounted to the end of any remaining normality in their lives, as the pressures of imminent defeat eroded the rhythms of everyday life. Nearly-incessant Allied bombing across Germany and the onset of artillery shelling as the Red Army assaulted Berlin resulted in scenes of utter devastation, often in cities and towns already scarred by the years of war. This physical destruction in turn resulted in the lack of services considered essential for modern society, including electricity and running water. When these factors combined with the collapse of the Nazi rationing and supply system, which led to an acute lack of food, German women surely felt as though their world had been crushed and destroyed along with the Nazi regime. However, rather than passively remain victims of the war without agency and at the mercy of the occupying Allies, German women instead became actors in their own fates, seeking to retain as much control as possible over their lives.

Faced with this end of normality – and a growing sense of defiance in the face of it – German women fought back by attempting to transform into actors and regain whatever agency they could, endeavors that were often influenced by the behavior and actions of the newly-arrived Allies. In Bavaria, these endeavors at times took the form of German women defying the Nazi reign of terror in order to band together to push their local leaders to surrender to the Americans without a fight. Through such actions, women refused to remain passive victims,

hoping instead to control the end of the war, rather than letting it control them. German women also pushed back against the Allied belief that Germans should bear a collective guilt for the crimes of the Nazis, struggling instead to preserve their own individual identities and, most importantly, their belief that, as individuals, they could control their own fates.

At times, the actions of the occupying Allied forces greatly inhibited women's search for agency, as in Berlin, where Soviet troops perpetrated mass rapes of German women.

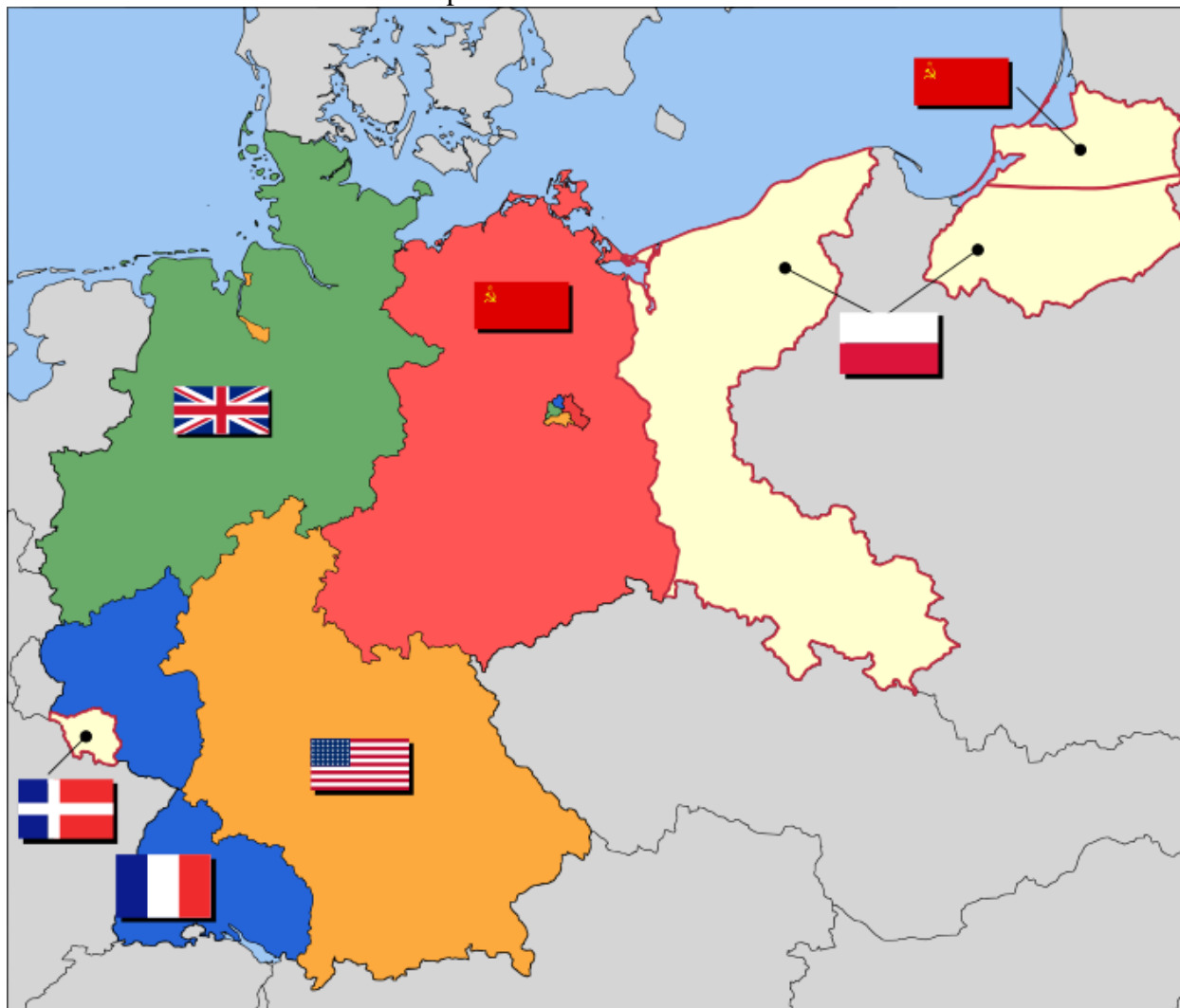
Throughout the city, women found that the randomness and brutality of the rapes reduced them to passive, helpless victims, dependent on the unpredictable actions of Red Army soldiers to determine the course of their lives. On the other hand, in Bavaria, where no mass rapes occurred, women were able to search for agency and stability quite early in the occupation period, a search that consequently led many to form relationships with American GIs, in what came to be termed "fraternization." Significantly, in both Berlin and Bavaria, the experiences of women during their search for agency had a significant influence upon the direction of Allied occupation policy. Indeed, after the mass rapes, the Soviet occupation authorities realized they desperately needed to improve their image with Berliners and, consequently, sped up the rate at which they restored essential services to the city. In the American zone of occupation, women's search for agency throughout fraternization resulted in two major reversals of American occupation policy: the end of the ban on fraternization and a change in American attitudes toward collective guilt.

Ultimately, this examination of German women's search for agency and their consequent transformation from victims to actors in whatever manner possible fills a significant gap in the historiography of the end of the Second World War and the beginning of Allied occupation of Germany, as many histories of the period only briefly address the situation of German women in

1945. By addressing this gap in the historiography, this study illuminates the great diversity of women's experiences in the chaotic year of 1945, as well as the courageous refusal of many women to remain passive victims of the Allies, both points often obscured by generalizations in other histories. This study thus challenges accepted notions about the early occupation period in Germany by highlighting the significant influence that women's experiences had upon the direction of both Soviet and American occupation policy. In the end, this examination of German women's search for agency during the chaos of the end of World War II and the beginning of Allied occupation leads to a greater understanding not only of the determination of women to become actors in their own fates, but also of the ways in which this determination influenced the direction of the Allied occupation of Germany.

**Figure 1:** The Occupation Zones of Germany, 1945

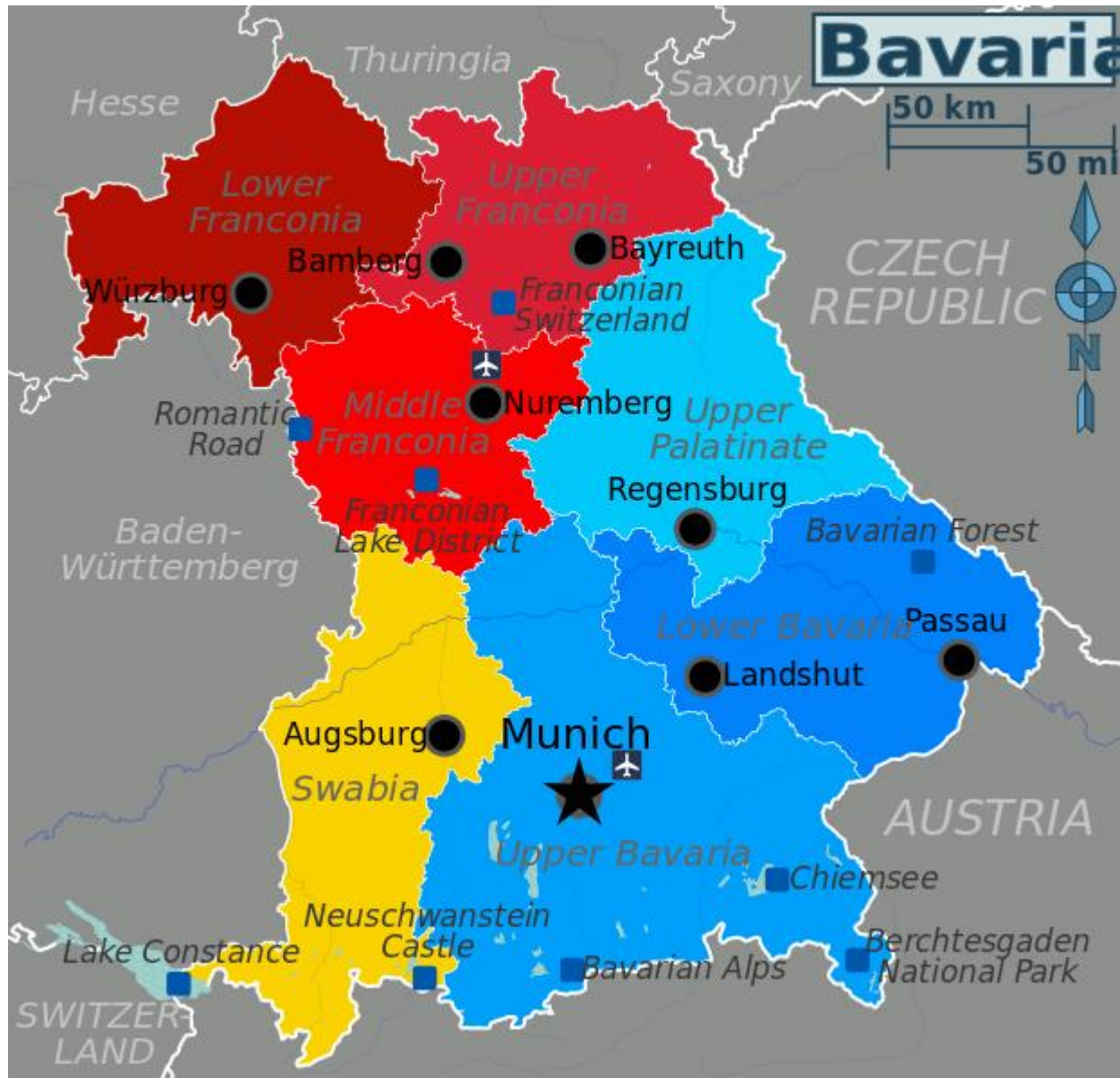
Note: Bavaria is in the southeastern portion of the American zone.



Source: Wikimedia Commons. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map-Germany-1945.svg>



**Figure 2:** Map of Bavaria



Source: Wikimedia Commons. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WV-Bavaria\\_regions.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WV-Bavaria_regions.svg)

**Figure 3:** Berlin in ruins, 1945



Source: "Berlin at the end of the war, 1945." *Rare Historical Photos*. Last Modified March 16, 2014. [www.rarehistoricalphotos.com/berlin-end-war-1945/](http://www.rarehistoricalphotos.com/berlin-end-war-1945/)

**Figure 4:** A ruined street in Berlin, 1945



Source: "Berlin at the end of the war, 1945." *Rare Historical Photos*. Last Modified March 16, 2014. [www.rarehistoricalphotos.com/berlin-end-war-1945/](http://www.rarehistoricalphotos.com/berlin-end-war-1945/)



**Figure 5:** German women doing their washing at a public water pump



Source: Wilkes, A. *German women doing their washing at a cold water hydrant on the street in Berlin, Germany, 3 Jul 1945.* July 3, 1945. Imperial War Museum, London. Accessed February 27, 2016. [http://ww2db.com/image.php?image\\_id=5321](http://ww2db.com/image.php?image_id=5321)

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