

Laura Shifflet

Women and War

11am-12:15pm Tuesday/Thursday

Professor McAdams

### Redefining War

Warfare, throughout history has always been an element of every civilization. The components of war have always been perceived as cut and dry. The men acted as combatants and protectors, while the women acted as the protected and curators of the homefront. The epic tale told in A Woman in Berlin, redefined the common themes of war. Among the themes that were redefined is the idea of who acts as protectors, how victims should act, how rape is understood within a society, and what the homefront is compared to the battlefield.

The account described in A Woman in Berlin, depicts many different images that contradict the perceived idea of who fills the role of a protector. While in every image of war, it is the man at the battlefield who is the protector of the women and children. This was not the image of a protector depicted in the novel. The German men whom were in Berlin at the time of the siege were shown as non-protectors and portrayed as helpless to defend their German women from the Russian invaders. One of the consistent male characters from the novel, who provided little protection to the protagonist and the widow, was Herr Pauli. Herr Pauli is the physically and mentally broken tenant of the widow. The only form of protection that he provides to the two women living in the apartment is his presents in relation to his gender. Although the protagonist describes him in a feminine manor, in that he is constantly grooming and performing manicures and pedicures on himself.<sup>1</sup> He also monitors every morsel of food that the protagonist eats due

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous, A Woman in Berlin. Eight Weeks in a Conquered City. A Diary, transl. Philip Boehm (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2005), p.148

to the fact that she did not live in the apartment prior to the siege, even if it is the food that she is providing from the Russian soldiers. He is also the reason for the protagonist being kicked out of the widow's apartment when she stops providing food.

Another incident where the German men do not protect their women from the brutal attacks of the Russian troops is in the case of Ilse's husband. While Ilse is first being raped, her husband was within hearing range of the incident, and did not have the power to do anything to stop it.<sup>2</sup> It is unclear if he lacked the physical or mental power to protect his wife. These incidents show how the men of Berlin became protected by the women instead of being the protectors of the women. Even the protagonist states that the women of Berlin do their best to hide and protect their men from the Russians. They do this because they feel that the Russians have done all they can do to hurt the women but can still hurt or kill the men.<sup>3</sup>

There is however, one event that is depicted in the novel where a husband comes to the rescue of his wife. While the bookseller's wife was returning with water from the pump, she protects her husband by getting the water instead of him because of his past political affiliations; she was attacked by a Russian soldier. Upon hearing his wife's screams the bookseller came out of their apartment and began attacking and shouting at the Russian soldier. He succeeds in his mission of protecting his wife when the Russian soldier relinquished his wife from his grips and flees the scene.<sup>4</sup>

Another way that the definition of protector was changed was the role of children during the siege. Traditionally, children are the ones being protected in warfare, but in the novel children are actually used as protection for their mothers. The prime example of this is in the case of Fräulein Behn and Frau Lehmann. The protagonist tells us that neither of the two women

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<sup>2</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.204

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.149

<sup>4</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.130

has been raped due to the fact that they are living with two small children. When the Russian soldiers enter the apartment with the intention to rape the women, they are distracted and stopped by the site of the small children in their cribs. Some Russian soldiers even have returned to the apartment with chocolate for the children.<sup>5</sup> The children mesmerize the soldiers as well as the people of Berlin because of their sheer innocence in the middle of the war. Another case of children protecting their parents is in the case of Frieda. Pregnant during the siege she has not been raped. She was pushed by a Russian soldier and had her stomach tapped and acknowledges that she was with child.<sup>6</sup> This shows that even some men in a brutal mindset like that of the soldiers have the courtesy to not harm the babies and children. Even children produced as a result of the mass rapes; provide some protection for their mothers after Germany surrenders. The protagonist writes about a rumor that states any woman who is pregnant with a Russian child will be giving the ration standings of group number I.<sup>7</sup> This protects the mother from the growing threat of famine after the war.

The character that most greatly redefines the understood definition of what it is to be a victim is the protagonist herself. She blurs the line between victim and hero in her acts of taking charge, as much as possible, of her life. She finds numerous ways to manipulate the Russian soldiers to gain the necessities she needs to survive. The first thing that she does to take control over the uncontrollable situation is reveal her knowledge of the Russian language. This is a critical skill that she uses to manipulate the Russian soldiers for food, and protection. The first soldier that the protagonist introduces us to is the Siberian Petka, whom she describes as a giant

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<sup>5</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.132-132

<sup>6</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.140

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.195

who speaks to her like a Romeo, who rapes her and leaves cigarettes a payment. He then returns with friends bring vodka, bread, and herring to eat.<sup>8</sup>

After this initial encounter the protagonist realizes that she has to offer herself to a high ranking officer to gain protection from the other barbaric soldiers. She does this by identifying a first lieutenant, Anatol, and inviting him up to the widow's apartment that night.<sup>9</sup> Anatol rapes her but provides physical protection by association to the protagonist from the other barbaric soldiers in return for her "services". He also provides the protagonist and the widow with food, such as bread, meat, bacon, butter, peas, onions, and canned vegetables. He also provides her with news and helps in learning more Russian words that can be used in her daily life.<sup>10</sup> After Anatol, is reassigned the protagonist must find a new high ranking officer to protector her from the rest of the Russian soldiers occupying Berlin. She finds this in the form a major. The major also provides the protagonist with food, news and candles, which are necessary due to the wide spread power outages.<sup>11</sup> Her relationship with the major is one that is slightly different from her other attackers, when he rapes he also talks to her like a fellow human. When she is with him she begins to rationalize the survival method that she has chosen. She questions if her relationship with the major could actually be considered rape, or if it is a mutual agreement between herself and the major. She also rationalizes the situations to remove herself from the role of victim allowing her to have more control over the situation.<sup>12</sup> The protagonist manipulates the Russian soldiers so that she "has them eating out of her hand".<sup>13</sup> Yet in her manipulation she also places

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<sup>8</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.64-65

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.65

<sup>10</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.74, 85

<sup>11</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.102, 103

<sup>12</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.115-116

<sup>13</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.72

herself in dangers, there is the risk of getting pregnant or of venereal disease. For taking these risks and managing to conquer the problems facing her on a daily basis she is a hero.

While the protagonist redefines the common concept of what a victim is, she also embodies the definition of a survivor. She is not alone in embodying the concept of being a survivor; every woman that she speaks with is a survivor. These women make the topic of rape one that is more commonly accepted in normal conversation. I feel that the protagonist expresses it best in the following quote,

”But here we’re dealing with a collective experience, something foreseen and feared many times in advance that happened to women right and left, all somehow part of the bargain. And this mass rape is something we are overcoming collectively as well. All the women help each other by speaking about it, airing their pain, and allowing others to air theirs and spit out what they’ve suffered.”<sup>14</sup>

Due to the openness of these women about their experiences it allows the horrendousness of mass rape to be something the community as a whole can deal with and heal. In the beginning of the war the protagonist even states that she had trouble writing and speaking about rape at first, and by the middle of the invasion it becomes a less horrendous topic.<sup>15</sup> It became part of common conversation between the women upon meeting. A prime example of this is when the protagonist visits Ilse and the first sentences exchanged between the women is the questions of “How many times were you raped?”<sup>16</sup> These women moved the discussion about rape from something that was not to be discussed, and still to this day is not completely accepted to be discussed, to one of the main topics to be discussed between them. Whether it was about who was saved from experiencing this horrible war tactic, or about how many time they were attacked

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<sup>14</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.147

<sup>15</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.63

<sup>16</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.204

everything was exposed to the public. Due to this, rape changed from something that was solely dealt with alone to something that the entire community dealt with. Yet the men returning from the battlefield did not understand this universal pain. This is shown by the reaction of the protagonist's husband, Gerd, when he refers to the women of Berlin as "shameless bitches", and essentially blames the protagonist for being raped.<sup>17</sup>

Two of the most common components of war are the homefront and the battlefield. In A Woman in Berlin, these two components were blurred into one within the city of Berlin. While the invasion itself turned Berlin into a battlefield, the civilians also contributed to it turning into a warzone. Numerous elements this was shown throughout the novel, taking refuge in the basement of their building was just the start. Prior to the Russian forces entering Berlin, the war entering the lives of the characters depicted within the novel, is shown through the advanced rationing and the need to wait in line for water since electricity was out within the buildings.<sup>18</sup> The first the event within the novel that can clearly shows just how similar the city of Berlin had become to a warfront is the ransacking of the police barracks. The protagonist describes a scene of complete and utter anarchy, with people running and pushing everywhere to collect as much food and beverages as possible.<sup>19</sup> The chaos of city continues in various fashions, with people looting dead bodies, and breaking into private gardens and stealing food. Food even becomes so scarce that the citizens of Berlin resort to eating injured horses. The commonality of eating injured horses is shown in the end of the novel when four-year-old Lutz Lehmann asks "Mutti, can we eat the horse?"<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.259

<sup>18</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.17 and Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.31

<sup>19</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.38-393

<sup>20</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.261

The most distributing images given to the reader about how the homefront has turned into the battlefield is the story told by Hilde. She tells the protagonist of her seventeen year old brother whom left their shelter to see what was going on and was killed when a piece of shrapnel tore through his temple. Fellow Germans looted his body, undressed him and carried him to the nearest cinema. It took Hilde two days to find his body and to bury him in his rain jacket in the Volkspark in a shallow grave.<sup>21</sup> Another element that helped to dissolve the barrier between the two fronts was the constant present of the Russian soldiers, and the constant fear of air bombardments. The illustration of complete anarchy within the city of Berlin shows how the general population dealt with the non-existent division between the battlefield and homefront. Another way in which the homefront turns into a battlefield is a result of the women themselves turning into soldiers. Their bodies become the battlefield within the trenches of rape. Rape itself became a survival tool with the extreme circumstances in which they were facing in this wartime situation. These women battle for every element of survival, from food to safety.

Overall the heroic tale told in A Woman in Berlin, allows the reader to reevaluate what they believe the roles are of the common stereotypes of war. The protagonist depicts the actions of the civilian population of Berlin along with the actions of the Russian troops to show how these common stereotypes can change when in a real life wartime situation. The definition of protector was changed when it was filled by children and not by German men. Victims were turned into survivors and gained power over their attackers. Rape was discussed in public and out in the open among everyone within Berlin. Finally is the lack of a differences in total war between the homefront and the battlefield. All of these common war components were redefined within the siege of Berlin and depicted in A Woman in Berlin.

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<sup>21</sup> Anonymous, Woman in Berlin, p.233