Gendering the Holocaust:
Analyzing the Influence of Gender and Sexuality Among Holocaust Perpetrators and Victims.

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Abstract

From 1941-1945, the Nazi regime perpetrated one of the worst atrocities in recorded history. Approximately eleven million people would lose their lives, and a nation would be symbolically tried for these crimes at Nuremberg and the subsequent tribunals. Most of the defendants were men, but it is false to assume that the Holocaust was exclusively perpetrated by men. This project explores the atrocities committed by female perpetrators, as well as the experiences of female prisoners. Because of Germany's feminization of homosexual men, their experiences are also included in this project. The concept of gender being a determining factor in the Holocaust has long been ignored, save for more recent scholarship on the topic. This project argues that gender and sexuality was a determining factor in the Holocaust, from the perspective of both perpetrator and victim, and that historians must take this into consideration when researching the autonomy and experiences of Holocaust participants.
Holocaust perpetrators have been studied since World War II came to an end in 1945. In the beginning, research primarily focused on administrators of the Holocaust: high ranking Nazi bureaucrats who ordered the deaths of millions. Historians later went on to study the perpetrators found within the camps. Christopher Browning published *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* in 1992, however, it contained a glaring omission. The usage of the word “men” suggests that female perpetrators were nonexistent. Gender played a large role in the Holocaust, which is why a gendered approach to its perpetration is essential. The Nazi government was patriarchal, although women did find opportunities to serve in concentration camps as nurses and guards. With women comprising only a fraction of personnel in a concentration camp, men were the majority of perpetrators, which led to gender-based violence. Sexual violence was commonplace, and not even male prisoners were spared. This paper shall examine the effect of gender and sexuality on the Holocaust and will argue that it was a determining factor in the experiences of its participants and that going forward, the Holocaust should be studied with a gendered perspective by historians.

Sexism was deeply ingrained in Nazi doctrine. Adolf Hitler held many different groups responsible for Germany’s defeat in World War I, and among them were women. In reference to “complaining letters from home”, Hitler argued that “senseless letters of German women cost hundreds of thousands of men their lives”.¹ This is a ridiculous argument, but it demonstrates a basis for Hitler’s sexism. Hitler’s sexism is further outlined when he details his citizenship requirements. He argued that men should receive citizenship only after completing military service, while women must marry or “active in economic life” in order to receive the benefits of

citizenship. This furthers the notion that women were merely bearers of children in the eyes of Hitler, and that motherhood was what women should aspire toward. In a speech given to the National Socialist Women’s League, Hitler equated feminism with Judaism, arguing that the that “The slogan ‘Emancipation of women’ was invented by Jewish intellectuals” and that “neither sex should try to do that which belongs to the sphere of the other”.

The gendered nature of German society necessitates the need for a gendered perspective on the Holocaust.

Despite the evidence of sexism mounted against women in Nazi Germany, historians originally doubted the impact of gender on the Holocaust. Researchers such as Christopher Browning and Daniel Goldhagen did include female perpetrators in their studies, however, they did so only to further examine the woman’s male colleagues. It would not be until the 1990s when feminist historians had successfully argued that female perpetrators were more than just victims of a sexist culture, but also possessed a level of autonomy that when they chose to perpetrate war crimes. The ongoing efforts by feminist historians has furthered debate on whether men and women should be viewed as separate populations by historians has been ongoing since the 1990s. Ruth Bondy argued that since “Zyklon B did not differentiate between men and women”, there is no reason for her to do so as a historian.

The resistance toward a gendered examination of the Holocaust is unsurprising, as historians have equated it to “privileging” one group over another, but the notion of privilege among victims of the Holocaust

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2 Ibid., 441.
is absurd. Gendered perspectives on history have become more prevalent in recent years, which is why gendering the Holocaust is all the more crucial.

**Medical Killings**

The ‘ordinary German’ needs to be reexamined through a gendered lens to include women. Daniel Goldhagen’s and Christopher Browning’s studies into ordinary German soldiers furthered historians’ understanding of Holocaust perpetration by describing the motivations for complying with the orders to commit genocide. The nurses who perpetrated these acts could not be referred to as ordinary, as Nazis had purged socialists and other left-leaning nurses were dismissed in 1933. In addition to politics, one nurse was dismissed for “living in sin”, demonstrating the social conservatism demanded by Nazi rulers. The remaining nurses were, at the very least, unaffiliated with leftwing groups, but were also likely to have views that aligned with NSDAP. The nurses that remained were given re-education to become indoctrinated in Nazi eugenics. This indoctrination included being subservient to doctors and acting in a support role rather than a proactive one. Nurses were instructed to obey doctors in all instances, and they were told to limit their reports to facts alone, not speculation. They were also instructed not to “lead” the conversation while in the presence of a doctor, which limited a nurse’s ability perform her duties. This policy served two purposes for the Reich. The first being that it propagated the subordination of women, the second that it created a culture of obedience among nurses, which was necessary to the perpetration of widespread euthanasia and unethical medical experiments.

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6 Ibid., 229.
8 Ibid., 155-156.
The subservience of nurses would only become greater, as they became more involved in the process of mass murder.

Many of the killings performed by nurses consisted of psychiatric patients, and the total dead numbered up to two hundred thousand. The ideological purges and obedience conditioning laid the groundwork for the compliance of nurses. Germany was well aware of the negative psychological consequences of mass murder, as they made sure to limit the damage incurred by concentration camp guards by providing them with rest and the option to transfer. The wellbeing of nurses was also considered, and the method for euthanasia was methodical and involved little to no blood, limiting the nurses’ potential trauma.⁹ The seemingly nonviolent nature of the killings was a moral rationalization for the nurses, although many would later testify that they understood their actions were wrong. The role of nurses had changed under Nazi rule. At some hospitals, up to ninety seven percent of patients had died, making it clear that medical care was not a priority at these facilities. Under these conditions, nurses were not caretakers, but rather their primary function was to maintain the illusion that “care still existed in the midst of systemic murder”.¹⁰ This was achieved through a variety of methods, usually through prescribing patients poison and lying to them about its contents. Nurse Elsen was a nurse who was described as having a sadistic personality when caring for patients. Elsen committed acts of violence that far exceeded that of her fellow nurses. According to one account, she slammed the head of an old woman against the ground until she died.¹¹ This was an incredibly violent act, and it was done entirely without influence from another individual, because Nazi officials went to great lengths to prevent nurses from performing such violent acts. Nurses were conditioned to euthanize

⁹ Ibid., 210-211
¹⁰ Ibid., 214.
¹¹ Ibid., 215-216.
otherwise healthy patients based perceived racial, mental, or physical inferiority, but some went further, breaking the Nazi ideals of femininity.

Immediately after the war, thousands of survivors testified about their experiences during the Holocaust. One such witness was Czesława Zugaj, a political prisoner who was held in both Auschwitz and Ravensbrück. Zugaj was not Jewish, but a Roman Catholic. She claimed that Jewish prisoners were “much worse to us than the SS men”. Zugaj was pregnant while she was in Auschwitz, and because of this her treatment only worsened. One female German doctor performed cruel experiments on Zugaj and other pregnant women, leading them to believe the doctor wished to induce a miscarriage. In addition to the doctor, German nurses also abused the prisoners. Mothers of newborn children were forced to work by the nurse rather than care for their children. Germany’s fixation on motherhood did not extend to prisoners, meaning many of the children born in the camps would ultimately die. Female perpetrators did have to reconcile with the implications of mistreating pregnant prisoners, as many of the perpetrators may have been mothers. Aufseherin—female overseer—cruelty to prisoners often reached levels of absurdity. According to the account of Anna Druszkowska, a female guard had beaten prisoners for “glancing around” when waking toward a factory. The sadism of SS-Helferin—Female SS helpers—knew no bounds, for prisoners were denied access to the bathroom and personally whipped by the female overseers. Women, while certainly viewed as inferior to their male counterparts, committed brutal acts in Ravensbrück and other concentration camps alongside them.

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12 Czesława Zugaj, interview by Helena Miklaszewska, December 26, 1945, transcript, Polish Research Institute Collection, Lund University, Sweden, 2.
13 Ibid., 5-6
14 Anna Druszkowska, interview by Helena Miklaszewska, April 7, 1946, transcript, Polish Research Institute Collection, Lund University, Sweden, 3.
Nursing traditionally has been viewed as a role for women, so it is no surprise that the Nazis employed women as nurses to assist in medical experimentation of prisoners. Women as a whole were in a subordinate position in the Nazi hierarchy, but even more so when serving as nurses as opposed to guards, for they likely served directly under the supervision of a male doctor, while female guards could be supervised by other women. The duties performed by nurses also covered a wider range of moral ambiguity. Nurses would treat patients, most of whom were guards, but in some cases, prisoners would be given medical attention. In addition to the normal duties of a medical professional, Nazi nurses would be expected to assist in euthanizing, sterilizing, and experimenting on prisoners. T4 was the name for Nazi Germany’s euthanasia program, and it is generally accepted that nurses were willing, perhaps even enthused, at the prospect of euthanizing Slavs, Jews, and other “undesirables”.

Medical officials, both male and female, participated in atrocities, however, there are accounts of medical professionals not partaking in the atrocities. Dr. Hans Münch was the only SS doctor at Auschwitz not to partake in the atrocities. Given that Munch was able to remain at Auschwitz despite his reluctance to participate in medical experimentation, it is likely that medical personnel operated under a different set of rules than guards, as a guard would have received a transfer had they refused. Even though nurses occupied a subordinate position as a result of their gender, they possessed a greater level of autonomy than general perpetrators, as they belonged to the group of medical professionals.

The autonomy of nurses was debated after the war, and it factored into the punishments they received. Death and disease were ever present in the camps and factories, and limited support was given to support their work. Pregnant women working in a Gifhorn Volkswagen plant were given only spoiled food and used as slave labor, yet over five hundred children were born in the hospital and housed in a nursery run by Ella Schmidt. Of these, most would die due to insufficient rations, poor living conditions, and limited training of nurses. The nurses, appalled at the nursery conditions, complained to Dr. Hans Korbel, who had the nurses sent to concentration camps for “being overtly concerned” for the wellbeing of their patients.\footnote{Robert W. Kesting, “They Cry No More: A Case of War Crimes Against Newborns,” \textit{The Polish Review} 37, no. 3 (1992): 318, www.jstor.org/stable/25778644.} This was a rather unusual punishment dispensed to the nurses, but it does illustrate the reality of the dangers of noncompliance. Women could not give orders to male colleagues, nor could they refuse them. They were in an inherently subordinate position as young, untrained nurses working in a system of factories that Hitler “personally” ordered Himmler to oversee.\footnote{Ibid., 316.} German women committing infanticide does, however, contradict the image of motherliness promoted by the Nazi regime. The Nazis were able to rationalize the nurse’s actions, due to the subhuman identity ascribed to prisoners. Most of the testimonies from nurses gave one of two explanations for their actions during the war. The first being that the nurses cared for their patients and did not participate in the atrocities, the second being that they were simply following the orders of the doctors. As with other perpetrators, ‘following orders’ was not an adequate legal defense, and many nurses were punished for their crimes. However, the nurses were far less likely to receive a death sentence than the doctors.\footnote{Colin A. Holmes, Margaret McAllister, and Andrew Crowther, “Nurses Writing about Psychiatric Nurses’ Involvement in Killings during the Nazi Era: A Preliminary Discourse Analysis,” \textit{Health and History} 18, no. 2 (2016): 70, doi:10.5401/healthhist.18.2.0063.} One doctor, Dr. Wernicke, attempted to shift blame toward the
nurses. Dr. Wernicke displayed several contradictions in her legal defense, and she became one of only a handful of women to be sentenced to death by the Allies after World War II had ended.

Prosecutors were aware of power imbalances that existed between the predominantly female nurses and the predominantly male figures of authority. Because of the subservient position of nurses, they were typically viewed as accomplices, not perpetrators when being prosecuted. The Frankfurt court that prosecuted the nurses showed some leniency to the defendants, arguing that their “primitive nature” prevented them from resisting the orders of their superiors. The sexist nature of the prosecution is not without foundation given the patriarchal structure of Nazi Germany and the events that occurred in Meseritz-Obrawalde, but blanket statements on the mental inferiority of women in the medical profession was certainly without foundation. Dr. Mathilde Weber was the managing physician of Kalmenhof mental hospital in 1940. Weber was reportedly revolted at the conditions in the hospital, yet she continued to order head nurse Maria Müller to euthanize the children. After being sentenced to death in 1947, she appealed and was given a new trial in 1949, where her role as a perpetrator was called into question. Weber’s “immaturity” and “youth” were cited as reasons for her being a “fundamentally a weak and unstable person”, which resulted in the court giving her a far more lenient sentence of only three years. Referring to Weber as a weak person and convicting nurses of murder based on motives such as love and thoughtlessness does call into question the objectivity of the investigators. Basing the prosecution on existing stereotypes diminishes the autonomy of Weber, a willing participant in mass murder.

21 Ibid., 143.
Dr. Wernicke was by no means a fanatic when she joined NSDAP in 1933, but rather she viewed such a move as advantageous to the advancement of her career. Wernicke had arrived at Meseritz-Obrawalde in 1943 and was reportedly appalled at the conditions of the camp. She allegedly attempted to receive a transfer away from the camp but was denied. Wernicke further elaborated her superiors’ response, stating “Even old and trusted colleagues were done away with when they spoke up”. This supports the claim that the nurses at the facility were sent to a concentration camp for speaking out against the nursery conditions. After the war, Wernicke gave more justifications for her actions. Wernicke rationalized her participation by arguing that she was not the one who performed the euthanasia; therefore, she should not be held responsible, but rather the nurses under her charge should. She was fully aware of her actions and the need to keep them secret, yet she still perpetrated them and argued that she was not responsible, that the nurses were.

The power imbalance between Wernicke and her male superiors is clear, as she reported fearing the supervisors, an argument Susan Benedict described as “well-founded”. But she also held considerable power, not only over her prisoners, but also over her nurses. She ordered her nurses to euthanize patients and would ultimately stand by as they were sent to a concentration camp for their protests. In her trial, Wernicke stated: “I loved my patients very much, never mistreated them, never hit them. To the contrary, I always took good care in order to ease their difficult lot as much as possible”. Wernicke’s claims of loving her patients were patently false, as she was completely aware of the procedures being done to them. Her willingness to commit

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23 Ibid., 74.  
24 Ibid., 75.
these atrocities was evident, and her position of power over the nurses arguably made her seem unwomanly to the prosecutors.

In addition to doctors and nurses, midwives were an integral part of Germany’s euthanasia program. Midwives were given increased legal protections and rights under Nazi rule, as the need for more Aryan children required additional midwives to care for mothers and newborns. With their increased status, midwives were also given more responsibilities, such as reporting genetically inferior offspring to Reich officials. This gave midwives a sense of power over their patients. Rather than simply being a caregiver, they were elevated to a position of power through being an informant. Midwives would also report suspected abortions and had the power to initiate a prosecution against the woman in question.\textsuperscript{25} The role of midwives became controlled even more by Nazi doctrine as time went on. In 1939, midwives became mandated reporters of genetically deformed children, and would be paid two Reichsmark for each report. Initially, most midwives neglected to report newborns with disabilities, but additional decrees by the Reich Ministry of the Interior added pressure to the midwives, and they began reporting children by the end of 1940. As midwives began to participate in euthanasia programs at greater rates, they took on added responsibilities, even acting beyond the law in some cases. Despite warnings from Nazi officials that midwives were not to make decisions on the viability of a newborn and that they would be criminally responsible if they terminated a healthy child, some midwives “Took it [newborn] into the other room”, where the child would euthanized.\textsuperscript{26} The dual loyalty of Nazi midwives led to an inevitable contradiction in their beliefs. Rather than act as


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 174-175.
mothers-to-be, midwives selected children to be euthanized, which further contradicts the German ideals of motherliness.

Female Guards

The Schutzstaffel, or SS, initially did not allow women to serve, however, German penitentiary traditions dictated that women must be guarded by women. The female perpetrator was different than her male counterpart. They were young, mostly in their twenties, had limited education, and had worked a variety of jobs prior to joining, such as Elisabeth Volkenrath, who was a hairdresser before becoming Lagerführerin—camp leader—of Birkenau women’s camp. Since patriarchy was the dominant culture in Nazi Germany, a woman could not give an SS man an older, even if he held a lower rank. The lower status of women in the armed forces is not unusual, as military service contradicted the idealized vision of what women were in Nazi ideology. In 1935, Adolf Hitler responded to his critics in by stating: “it is not degrading to be a mother” and then going further by saying “There is nothing nobler for a woman” to be a mother. The reason for Germany’s glorification of motherhood was the need for more Aryan children after low birthrates throughout the 1920s. This extended into the war, where the government would emphasize the importance of “protecting women from physical or mental strain that might endanger them as mothers.” Despite this concern, women served in concentration camps. Testimonies given by survivors of the camps indicated that women “enjoyed inflicting the most extreme brutalities”, directly in conflict with Nazi ideals of

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29 Ibid., WS44.
womanhood. The experiences of concentration camp prisoners varied based on a number of factors, but the brutality exhibited by their captors was always present.

Women served in roles beyond the traditionally feminine nursing and midwife. Concentration camp guards, typically a male profession, employed thousands of women throughout the Holocaust. At Ravensbrück, the overseers were exclusively female, as the notion of male guards overseeing a completely female camp contradicted the social conservatism instituted by the Nazi Party. Many of the women had limited employment opportunities elsewhere, due to their age and limited level of education. In the beginning, the guards volunteered, albeit under pressure from SS recruiters and deception on the nature of their assignment. By 1943, the Reich Labor Ministry was authorized to begin the conscription of not only men, but also women. Most of the conscripts would come from the lower classes, because middle and upper-class women could receive exemptions from mandatory service. The small amount of training they received before being tasked with controlling a large prisoner population was often inadequate, which caused them to struggle to maintain order. Because of the limited education and youth of the guards, many of the prisoners were more educated, viewing the guards as “stupid types”. This led to the guards developing a sense of inferiority and displaying a “juvenile” use of their power.

Emma Zimmer was the chief overseer of Ravensbrück until 1943, and she committed numerous atrocities in this role over the course of the war. Despite being executed for war crimes, Zimmer’s conduct differed from her subordinates. Nanda Herbermann was a prisoner at

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30 Wieviorka and Armstrong, “Women and the Post-war Nazi Trials,” 150.
32 Ibid., 26.
Ravensbrück, and she described Zimmer as “far less evil than others”.

This perception of Zimmer as a more lenient and merciful overseer speaks to the cruelty that existed within Ravensbrück and contradicts the notion that conditions in the camp were better than other camps. Herbermann assisted Zimmer in dispensing punishment to the camp’s prisoners by typing out the punishment decrees. Herbermann felt distraught each time she sent the names of prisoners to be sent to extermination, which caused her to resent the overseer. Zimmer noticed this, and according to Herbermann, she “wanted to be rid of me”, and it is likely that by transferring Herbermann to the camp inspector, Zimmer had thought she would be sent away from the camp for extermination.

The account of Herbermann demonstrates the brutality that existed within Ravensbrück, and the atrocities that female overseers perpetrated,

Overseeing an exclusively female population of prisoners mitigated the potential gender power imbalance between prisoner and overseer, but the relative youth and inexperience of the women tasked with operating the camp diminished their authority. Despite the overly aggressive behavior of some overseers, others were more cordial with the prisoners, even fostering personal relationships. In 1943, a twenty-year-old guard named Krüger arrived at the camp. She would take food from the SS pantry to give share with prisoners and Polish workers, and even admitted feeling “ashamed” for conditions at Ravensbrück. Another overseer, Brigitte, complimented the women, stating “I am really proud to have so many well-educated women in my crew”. While it certainly was the exception, it was not an uncommon occurrence at Ravensbrück to have guards show compassion toward their prisoners. The SS did not punish guards who showed compassion, but rather tolerated the behavior as long as it did not interfere with the guards’ duty.

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34 Ibid., 197.
35 Morrison, Ravensbrück, 27.
Despite the small instances of compassion shown toward the prisoners, Ravensbrück remained a symbol of cruelty, and thousands of women would perish there before the war’s end.

A discussion on the guards of concentration camps must include kapos, as they behaved in a way similar to guards. Liana Millu was a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, and while incarcerated, she and her fellow prisoners were terrorized by a female kapo. Despite Liana previously being friends with the kapo—Lili Marlene—she described Lili as “horrid” and received a smack that “stung my cheek” almost immediately upon being assigned to her.\(^36\) The sudden disregard Marlene showed toward their prior friendship seems unconscionable, but it is not dissimilar from how kapos behaved, as their grip on power was tenuous. As a kapo, Marlene falls into the collaborator category, although it should be noted that kapos were victims as well. Male kapos often kept lovers, referred to as a kochany by the other prisoners, and they often became de facto kapos themselves. One such kochany was named Mia, and she often imposed her will on Millu and her fellow prisoners. In one such instance, Mia yelled at her work detail, calling them “filthy whores” and further denigrating them by saying: “Just at these godforsaken creatures, here only a few months and they’re already half dead, they can’t lift a finger, and they think they’ll get home in one piece”.\(^37\) The cruelty of kapos and kochany toward the prisoners demonstrates the infectious nature of sadism throughout the camps.

As an all-female camp, the needs of the prisoners of Ravensbrück differed from those of other concentration camps. At all camps, little effort was made to maintain the hygiene and health of those interned, and Ravensbrück is no exception. The physical and emotional trauma of deportation, internment, and forced labor endured by the prisoners caused the majority to

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\(^37\) Ibid., 42.
become amenorrheic. Lola Blatt, a prisoner held at Auschwitz-Birkenau, stated “none of the women had their menstrual periods” in a 1983. Some prisoners believed the cause of this was sterilization drugs secretly being given to them by the SS, but there is no evidence for this claim. Although most women stopped menstruating, some continued, which unfortunately led to increased harassment from the overseers. The camp provided nothing for women who were menstruating, forcing women to “let the blood run down their legs” and face being punished by the overseers. The lack of concern for feminine hygiene from the overseers represents a fundamental lack of solidarity with the female prisoners from the female guards. Rather than see the prisoners as fellow women deserving of basic hygiene care, the guards ridiculed and punished women who menstruated. To the surprise of Allied liberators, no woman held in Ravensbrück reported being the victim of sexual violence. One woman named Wanda reported fear of being raped by SS men, but she did not have this fear while at Ravensbrück. Some prisoners claimed they were not raped because they found themselves to be unattractive while held, but this interpretation is likely untrue when compared to the experiences of women at other camps and the typical power-based motivations of rapists. Some prisoners reported having “consensual” sexual relationships at Ravensbrück, but the power imbalance between a male guard and female prisoner makes this incredibly unlikely. Sexual encounters between SS personnel and prisoners were a rare occurrence, but the topic deserves more consideration.

**Sexual Violence**

Upon entering a concentration camp, female inmates were almost immediately humiliated in a sexually demeaning way. All prisoners, regardless of gender, were shaved as they

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40 Ibid., 178.
were examined by medical personnel. Micheline Maurel, a survivor of Ravensbrück, recounted her arrival at the camp. While waiting to be examined, she and the women heard “abuses in German” and then saw “a naked woman, empty handed, her head shaved”. The act of forcibly shaving a head is meant to be dehumanizing, and it induces much trauma on the victim. Women often report being more deeply affected by this form of abuse than men, as it was perceived as an attack on their femininity and sexual identity. Isabelle Choko, a prisoner at Auschwitz, recounted the feelings of having her head shaved, saying “at the precise moment my head was shaved, I ceased to exist as a human being”. Fortunately, Maurel did not have to endure this additional level of trauma, however, the examination remained invasive, with camp personnel “exploring” Maurel’s and the other women’s “natural orifices” before being shuffled back to their barracks. Unfortunately for Maurel and the other female inmates, the sexual violence and humiliation only worsened as time went on.

Ravensbrück and other concentration camps further exploited and abused their female prisoners by creating brothels. The idea of forming brothels with prisoners was created by Oswald Pohl and Himmler in 1941. Brothels were envisioned as a method of incentivizing male prisoners to meet production quotas. The first brothel was established in Mauthausen in 1942, and the program quickly expanded to other camps, such as Buchenwald, Auschwitz, and Sachsenhausen. No Ravensbrück women were “forced” to become prostitutes, however, given the deplorable living situation in the camps, the promise of better food, clothing, and private rooms made the offer hard to refuse. The sexual exploitation of women during times of war is

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commonplace, but the Germans did so covertly, making the women believe that they were “willing” rather than simply forced to comply out of practical necessity. Most of the women were either former prostitutes or came from the Punishment Block and wished to escape their situation. However, according to Lola Blatt, Jewish women “were lucky not to be considered” for service in the brothels, as sex with a Jewish woman could be a capital offense. Unfortunately, Blatt recounted that the rape of Jewish women did occur, but this was done outside of brothels in secrecy. The “volunteers” would be inspected nude by SS officials before being transported to their new home. Frau W. was interviewed about her experiences as a prostitute. She described receiving far better conditions than she had while on the Punishment Block. Frau W. was expected to “service” eight men each evening and would be paid one Reichsmark for each customer. The situation did provide some level of autonomy for the women as it allowed them to make purchases with their Reichsmarks. Furthermore, women allegedly had “sweethearts” as frequent customers, and some described the relationship as consensual, even romantic. The system of prostitution in Nazi Germany was still an oppressive institution. Although women were promised that their time as prostitutes would only last six months, most were forced to remain for a longer time. Unfortunately, the situation for prostitutes outside of Ravensbrück was often far worse.

The history of prostitutes in the Warsaw ghettos is an incredibly complicated one. Rather than view the women as victims of sexual violence, the prevailing postwar opinion was that the women were Nazi collaborators, and some would even be tried. According to legal scholar Nomi Levenkorn, survivors often felt shame and guilt for the abuse they suffered during the war, and

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46 Morrison, Ravensbrück, 203-204.
the prevailing view that “A woman who provided sexual favors for food was defined one-dimensionally as a prostitute rather than as a person who struggled for survival” did not help quell the feelings of shame among women who were victimized.\textsuperscript{47} Holocaust gender specific violence research did not begin until feminist movement of the 1970s, meaning early researchers did not conduct interviews with prostitutes, as they were not initially seen as victims. Historians have begun to understand that the Holocaust is gendered, and any study of the Holocaust must account for the typical differences between the experiences of male and female prisoners and perpetrators. It is misleading to claim that prostitutes were simply women who sought to gain additional privileges or luxuries, as this ignores the position these women were in. The majority of women had no other option than to trade sex for food, making the situation closer to sexual slavery than a consensual transaction. Due to German racial purity laws, it was forbidden for German men to have relations with Jewish woman, which meant the rape of Jewish women was forbidden, but this was seldom enforced. Sexual violence was rampant under Nazi occupation, and many women already were victimized through sexual violence, and for some, prostitution was a means of survival through further victimization.\textsuperscript{48} Until recently, it was believed that sexual violence in concentration camps during the Holocaust extended only to forced prostitution, but it is now understood that a system of sexual slavery existed within the camps that systematically abused women.

\textit{Rassenschande} translates to “blood disgrace” and refers to the Nazi opposition toward Aryans having sexual relationships with non-Aryans. Despite the racial miscegenation laws, Jewish women were raped during the Holocaust. Women were mostly raped shortly after the


\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 106-107, 113-115.
Nazi invasion of Poland, when soldiers could justify conducting “searches” of houses to their superiors. Jan Rozansski, a survivor of the Krakow Ghetto described an incident when an SS soldier called Jan and his mother downstairs to clean, and at the foot of the stairs they saw “a young girl…Her dress lifted and pants torn off her body. She was raped, illegally, and then killed, legally, by the representants [sic] of the ‘high race.’”.49 The bluntness of Rozansski’s description of events highlights the German attitudes toward Jews and sexual violence. The act of rape was only illegal for the SS soldier because the victim was Jewish, yet it was legal for them to kill Jews. The act of rape did not stop in the ghetto, instead it followed Jewish women into the concentration camps. There are numerous accounts of German soldiers raping women in the camps despite it being illegal. Emil G., prisoner at Auschwitz-Birkenau described how SS soldiers took twenty female prisoners to a work detail and raped them in full view of the male prisoners, who were forced to stand and applaud. Not only is this meant to sexually humiliate the women, the Germans forced the men to watch as a means of emasculating them by showing how powerless they truly were. German women were an integral part of luring victims to be raped by SS men. Sara M., an inmate of Ravensbrück reported being offered candy by a woman before being led to a room where she was raped by two SS men.50 The sexual exploitation of women in concentration camps, although illegal under German racial purity laws, was prevalent.

**Male Homosexuality**

Discussion on gender in the Holocaust must also include men, and while heterosexual relationships are important to study, homosexual ones must also be studied. Hans G., a man suspected of being a homosexual, was stationed at Mauthausen, a concentration camp with a

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50 Ibid., 112.
high number of gay inmates. Homosexual men wore a pink triangle on their uniforms when interned in camps. The outcome of Hans’ case is unclear, but the fact that he was found to have attended Catholic school as a child, an apparent indicator of homosexual activity to Nazi courts, and he allegedly had two instances of “mutual masturbation” with another man, to which he responded by saying “These are the only incidents”. The courts did not believe Hans. Unfortunately, records of his appeal have been lost, so it is impossible to say whether he was successful in proving his innocence through appeal.

In concentration camps, kapos, wielded significant power over the other prisoners. They held significant authority over inmates, as they had the ability to report them to the SS for punishment. Mark Stern was a Jew being held at Flossenburg, and he was approached by a homosexual kapo. Stern refused the kapo’s advances, which resulted in him receiving a hundred lashes. One of Stern’s friends entered a relationship with another kapo, but much like the women “volunteered” as prostitutes, it is unlikely that this relationship was consensual given the significant power imbalance. The practice of homosexuality in the camps among those in positions of power extended beyond kapos.

As with other prisoners, homosexuals were subjected to cruel experimentation by the Nazi regime. Nazi Germany viewed homosexuality as a disease that could be “cured” through science, which is why countless homosexuals were tortured in an attempt to change their sexuality. Many of the records detailing the practice of experimentation on homosexuals in concentration camps were lost, information on Dr. Carl Vaernet of Buchenwald remains. Vaernet had believed homosexuals could become heterosexual through hormone treatment and requested

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prisoners to experiment on to test his theory. Himmler supported Vaernet’s and other physician’s efforts, as the need for more Aryan offspring necessitated the rehabilitation of homosexuals. The source material on the treatment of homosexuals in concentration camps is limited, but there is information of the methods employed by Vaernet. Buchenwald homosexuals were tested thoroughly by Vaernet, analyzing urine, stool, and blood samples in an attempt to identify the cause, and possible cure, of homosexuality. Castration was a remedy commonly prescribed once hormones failed. Despite the lack of success, Vaernet continued to order more men to undergo hormone and castration treatment. It is unknown how many died as a result of these procedures.\textsuperscript{53} The persecution of homosexuals was due to the social conservatism of Nazi ideology, as well as the patriarchal norms of German society. Homosexual men were perceived as feminine, which is why they were forced to wear the pink triangle in concentration camps. Homosexuals were more vulnerable in the camps than other religious, ethnic, and political groups because of their small size and the alienation they experienced from other prisoners. The small population of homosexuals was relatively easy for the SS to control in each camp, and their small size made it difficult to gain the same bargaining power for better living conditions that other groups could muster. Other than a kapo forming a relationship with a homosexual, the gay communities in the camps were largely ostracized by other prisoners, viewing them as “despicable degenerates”.\textsuperscript{54} The perception of homosexuality as an ailment and emasculate lifestyle conflicted with the hypermasculine culture propagated by Nazi society. Homophobia extended even into other marginalized groups, who saw the gay community as lesser despite being held in the same camps.

Rudolf Hoess, Commandant of Auschwitz, was held prisoner during the 1920s as a political prisoner and formed theories on homosexuality based on his observations as a prisoner. Hoess had witnessed young, attractive men being given incentives, such as protection and extra food, by male homosexuals in exchange for sex. It was this experience that reinforced the idea of homosexuality as a disease that spreads within an entirely male prison population. The absence of women, in Hoess’ opinion, did not negate the need for sex among men, instead it caused men to seek pleasure elsewhere. While in Sachsenhausen in the mid-1930s, Hoess had a population of gay men, and Hoess attempted to gay conversion on the group. The attempted treatments were very dangerous, and those who died were believed to have lacked the “inner strength” to live a heterosexual lifestyle, condemning them to forever be “slaves to their vice”. Hoess used “inner strength” as a means of denigrating homosexuals as weak and feminine. The gendered language used to describe gay men in Nazi Germany consisted of using language meant to associate them with women. Describing gay men as having “a soft, female prudishness and affection”, Hoess had emasculated the gay men in the prison. In a patriarchal society such as Nazi Germany, likening a man to a woman was meant to be a grave insult. Even with homosexual men, the oppression of women during the Holocaust did not cease. Hoess wrote that Himmler had orchestrated renunciation tests for Ravensbrück for gay men, where prostitutes were instructed to approach gay men and attempt to sexually excite them. After this test, those who passed were offered the opportunity to have sexual relations with a man, and those who refused had the opportunity to be released as they had been “cured”. Using women as sexual objects for homosexual men is certainly ingrained in sexism. The creation of brothels and sexual slavery of

56 Ibid., 109.
57 Ibid., 109.
women entrenched the patriarchy into German society. The subjugation of women did not end with prostitution, however. As with men, homosexual women were also held in camps and experimented on.

**Lesbianism**

In contrast to male homosexuals, lesbians were given the lesser priority of prosecution as male homosexuals were viewed as the greater threat. The gendered nature of prosecution was no accident, as the German Ministry of Justice justified the discrepancy by stating lesbianism “is less obvious, less conspicuous” than male homosexuality, and the “vice” of homosexuality is more common among men, and the fertility of men is wasted in same-sex intercourse, while Reich officials argued that lesbians were more likely to procreate than homosexual men. This justification for the lower prosecution rates of lesbians is ingrained in sexism. The willingness of lesbians to marry a man and have children diminished the need to control their “vice”, as Germany’s desire for more Aryan children trumped their homophobia. The subordinate status of women also contributed to this attitude, because women who were “corrupted” by homosexuality would not hold as significant influence over society that men would. Himmler did express fear that a divergence from traditional forms of femininity could result in an increase male homosexuality, calling it “catastrophic when we masculinize women the women” as men may find women unattractive. Himmler’s concern of lesbianism is not directed toward the corruption of women, but rather that of men. Therefore, while Nazi enforcement of anti-

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59 Ibid., 20.
homosexual laws largely excluded women, they were deeply rooted in sexism, as they furthered the subordination of women as nothing more than child bearers.

Even with the lax enforcement of homophobic laws on lesbian women, they were still a heavily persecuted group in Nazi Germany who had vastly different experiences throughout the Holocaust. Elisabeth Leithäuser was a lesbian woman imprisoned for her communist sympathies in the early 1930s, but even after her release she was under the direct scrutiny of the Gestapo for the remainder of Nazi rule. The Gestapo would frequently question her about her personal in hopes he would divulge information about political dissidents, and in one of these instances they stated “We know about your private life; you, and not only you…we have a list of these women”. Nothing came of this interaction, which represents the low priority purging lesbians occupied in Nazi ideology. The existence of the Leibniz Den, a lesbian bar that operated throughout the war furthers the apathetic prosecution of lesbians. Leithäuser had frequented the bar throughout the war, and she met a Gestapo woman during one of her visits. She felt an “evil attraction” toward the woman, and “was with her two or three times”, yet she faced no consequences for this. The lack of consequences Leithäuser faced was often mirrored by other lesbians. Margarette Knittel dated women during the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich and reported no increase in discrimination during the transition between the two regimes, however, her testimony details the lengths at which lesbians went to avoid being discovered. Knittel admitted to being very secretive about her sexuality, only telling her father when she turned thirty-two and refusing to kiss her girlfriends while in public. Knittel’s precautions proved to be prudent, as she remained undetected throughout the war. Gertrude Sandmann was a Jewish

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60 Ibid., 128.
61 Ibid., 130.
62 Ibid., 95-96.
lesbian who faced significantly more discrimination than Knittel. Despite the discrimination, she believed that her lesbianism made her “lucky”, as she desired a “union that neither impedes her work nor hampers her development”, which is unlikely to occur in a heterosexual relationship under the patriarchal norms of Nazi Germany. Sandmann was certainly in a privileged position not to have been sent to a concentration camp, but her opinion illustrates the reality that many lesbians, unlike Jews and male homosexuals, were able to escape being sent to a concentration camp.

The seemingly lax enforcement of anti-homosexual laws on lesbians did not shield all of them from being sent to a concentration camp. Thousands were sent to the camps, although many were sent for reasons other than their lesbianism, such as asocial behavior, which included prostitution among other offenses. At Ravensbrück, lesbians who made advances toward another prisoner were sent to the Punishment Block, however, no further reprisals were given if the advances continued, as the guards were generally apathetic toward such matters. The Punishment Block was referred to as a “lesbian whorehouse” by the prisoners, as lesbianism was reportedly so widespread that one French inmate had claimed that it was “impossible” for a woman to survive the Punishment Block without tacitly forming a lesbian relationship. The prevalence of same-sex relationships among prisoners was inevitable, not only because of the presence of lesbians and bisexual women, but the single-sex environment and trauma from deportation fostered the conditions for these relationships to thrive. Many of these relationships were platonic rather than sexual, as the psychological trauma inflicted on these women caused them to seek companionship wherever they may find it. Ravensbrück maintained anti-homosexual laws

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63 Ibid., 79.
64 Morrison, 229.
while declining to punish prisoners for their activity. In 1944, new arrivals to Ravensbrück noticed lesbian couples almost immediately, demonstrating the openness the women practiced their sexuality. The reason for the lack of punishments, according to Denise Dufournier, a heterosexual French prisoner at the camp, was that the guards “were more often than not guilty themselves”. This is evidenced by the case of a prisoner named Mulhouse and the camp’s chief doctor, who Dufournier claims “lived together as a couple”. The participation in same-sex relationships by Ravensbrück officials were an extension of the homosexual relationships between kapos and male prisoners, and furthers the notion that male and female homosexual relationships in the Holocaust must be viewed separately given the differing experiences of those involved.

The existence of lesbian relationships within concentration camps was not without its problematic aspects. Much like the male kapos who abused their position of power, blockovas and other inmates used their power to obtain sexual favors or other benefits from inmates. Gisela Zamora, an inmate held in Auschwitz, claimed that a German guard had a sexual relationship with two Jewish lesbians. Due to their relationship with the guard, Zamora reported that the two women were “in charge” of the other prisoners when the SS woman was not present, but this was not necessarily an example of quid pro quo between prisoner and guard, as Zamora claimed the guard “used them for sexual [sic]” indicating that the two Jewish women had not consented to the relationship. The power of SS women over prisoners made women vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Irma Grese, the “Hyena of Auschwitz” was among the more egregious female sexual abusers in the Nazi ranks. Gisella Perl, a Jewish gynecologist held in Auschwitz described

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65 Ibid., 133.
66 Gisela E. Zamora, interview by Amy Rubin, June 1, 2003, transcript, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, 2003.178, 44.
Grese as “the most beautiful woman I had ever seen” and “the most depraved, cruel, imaginative sexual pervert I ever came across”.

While Perl’s specific claims have largely been accepted as historical truth, female perpetrators were sexualized in the postwar period. Irma Grese and Ilse Koch were often the subjects of Nazi-style pornography, which furthered the notion of female perpetrators engaging in sexual sadism. Grese and other female guards occupied a traditionally masculine role, and their gender influenced not only their experiences as a guard, but their postwar experiences as well.

Irma Grese was twenty-one years old when she was tried for war crimes by a British tribunal. Due to her gender, Grese was treated differently than male defendants were as the press became infatuated with her. Noting her blonde hair and describing her as “pretty” the coverage of Irma Grese quickly became gendered. Referring to Grese as “pretty” is an incredibly problematic aspect of the postwar media coverage of female perpetrators. The Chicago Tribune also covered the Belsen Trial, and while they initially limited their coverage to discussing the crimes Grese committed, they then devoted a full paragraph to a discussion on Grese’s hairstyle, which was little more than a mere footnote at actual trial. In addition to the gendered coverage, the accused Nazi women were denigrated in much the same way male defendants were, but there was an added reason for highlighting the crimes committed by women. Irma Grese and Ilse Koch were naturally demonized by the press for their crimes, but ordinary German women received far better treatment. Rather than being seen as complicit in the atrocities, women were portrayed as

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victims. The German heroine became a symbol, as she was given the task of cleaning “up the mess of Germany’s shameful past”. Postwar depictions of German women’s part in World War II were rarely accurate, which contributes to the limited historiography on the subject.

The position of the wives of Nazi perpetrators is often shrouded in ambiguity. Their role in the Holocaust is a mixture of perpetrator and bystander. Even after being told of their husbands’ crimes, many Nazi wives refused to condemn or accept what their husbands had done. The wives had not only maintained their innocence by feigning ignorance, but also argued they were certain their husbands were innocent. One woman wrote to a minister and claimed her husband “has become the victim of hatred and revenge”. The inability to admit their husbands’ guilt is understandable given the circumstances. The women had indeed known of at least some of their husbands’ atrocities, but most still hoped for their husbands to receive leniency and to avoid prosecution themselves. Even Ilse Koch, the famed “Witch of Buchenwald” had feigned ignorance. At her trial, Koch had stated “I never saw anything at Buchenwald which might have been against humanity… I was too busy raising my two children”. While the court did not accept Koch’s defense, her claims were an attempt to capitalize on the gendered reality of Nazi Germany, where women, typically those belonging to the middle and upper classes, were confined to their homes to perform domestic duties.

The Holocaust’s gendered nature is apparent with proper historical context. Female perpetrators, while certainly in positions of power over the prisoners charged under their control, but they often were subordinate to the males around them, which was reflected in the postwar

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71 Lower, Hitler’s Furies, 10.
prosecution of these women. Among victims, gender greatly impacted their experiences in the camps, as female prisoners often performed sexual favors and developed relationships with male guards in exchange for food and clothing. The lack of consent calls these relationships into doubt, but *kapos* also had sexual relationships with prisoners, and these relationships were both homo and heterosexual in nature. Going forward, historians must contend with the inherent sexism in Nazi ideology when making a determination on the culpability of female perpetrators and the experiences of homosexual participants.
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