

**Rape in concentration camps:  
the patriarchal side of the Holocaust**



*Women in the barracks at Auschwitz, Poland, January 1945. Photo taken by a Russian photographer shortly after the liberation of the camp. (Credit: Galerie Bilderwelt/Getty Images)*

World War II was a dark chapter for humanity. After six years of fighting, it left globally around 70 million – or even more – casualties, which is considered to be about 3% of the global population in 1940. Still, the creation of the United Nations happened to guarantee that never again would we face a war such as this one, and there was also some relief: the

Nuremberg and Tokyo trials were established, to bring justice to the victims, peace to the countries and some sense of control. However, this justice was not for everyone: once again, women were set aside. Because something that was not included in this reparation system was the massive sexual violence committed against women alongside the conflict.

During the war, rape was something that happened daily, perpetrated massively by both sides. Women in concentration camps – especially the Jewish, Romani, and Sinti descent, women who joined the resistance against the Nazis, women that lived in areas under the German occupation and, even women who suffered rape perpetrated by the Allies in post-war Germany; according to the NGO *Medica Mondiale*, there was not one truly safe from those crimes. However, there were indeed some concrete women who had to bear a greater cost and that is why this article will focus on rape within concentration camps.

According to the feminist historian Susan Brownmiller, the main goal under the Nazis' rape campaign was to extend the terror in the population and as a way to humiliate and keep punishing the Jewish community, to keep dehumanizing them. During Nazi occupation, an extensive system of sexual slavery was established, and some abominations committed by the military have been compiled in the correspondence of different diplomats internationally, concretely from the Allied side, where they explain atrocities of rape and the torture of women, no matter the age, including even children and the elderly. Another common motivation underneath those rape campaigns was as a reward to militaries, treating women's bodies merely as a prize.

Concretely focusing on **concentration camps**, women were raped by the SS officers and even by other male prisoners. For the first ones, there were special barracks and, after raping those women, they most often would engaged also in physical violence against them – accusing them of having seduced them –to free themselves from the guilt of going against the Aryan ideals that forbid prostitution and that put Jewish women in the same category as animals – considering them as “inferior beings” –, and therefore going against the decrees that forbid having sexual relations with them.

Still, by Himmler's decision, there was an imposition of prostitution and sexual slavery within the camps. This was mainly done to “raise the incentives and productivity of prisoners”, to reduce the possibilities of homosexuality – which was greatly prosecuted in Nazi's Germany for “going against human nature” – and even for the mere pleasure of torturing the male prisoners, as it was a way to raise discord between them and, consequently, to minimize the possibility of a rebellion. As we can clearly see, women had such a lower value that raping them was usually not intended directly to torturing them, but just to torture the others. Some of the prisoners, furthermore, were sent to another of the brothels that the Nazis had throughout the Reich for the militaries or to other concentration camps. Therefore, women from Auschwitz-Birkenau and

Ravensbrück camps could end up as sexual slaves in Buchenwald, Dachau, Mauthausen, Gusen, etc.

Some women were promised they would be released after six months exercising as prostitutes, but that never happened. Others were given the “choice” of becoming sexual slaves or going to the gas chambers. Others were promised more food, some clothing, an option to survive the Holocaust. Others were just dragged into trucks, forced into brothels, picked by the Nazi officials, having no idea where they were going. However, these choices were never truly ones, and they all share one same story of having to face more than just becoming sexual slaves, as they became also guinea pigs for the Nazi “medical” and “scientific” experiments and abominations. At the same time, they tried to survive the tortures, forced abortions, sterilizations and beatings, many beatings. Besides, women were not given any system of sexual protection, being constantly exposed to venereal diseases and the possibility of pregnancy.

In some camps, pregnant women were practiced as many abortions as they could stand, even if their life was at risk. After some abortions – or some practices while the pregnancy was too advanced in time – the women may die. If they didn’t, they would just be sent back to the

brothels. In other cases, pregnant women were directly murdered, as was the fate for women infected by venereal disease – at least when they weren’t sent to some prisoners’ camp brothels to infect them. The best fate for sexual slaves was for them to lose their periods, something that happened quite often. Dr. Gisella Perl, that was an inmate but also the head women’s doctor at Auschwitz, and who had background education as a gynecologist, was in charge of informing Dr. Mengele – the “angel of death” – which prisoners were pregnant. However, once she realized what happened to them – who were used for “science” until death – she engaged in protecting those women, that most often became pregnant as a result of rape, sexual slavery, or sexual violence as an exchange commodity for goods.

Was there even the possibility of any peace for women? Enslaved, tortured, raped, and used as guinea pigs, in the book *If This Is a Woman* – a title that intends to echo Primo Levi’s book *If This Is a Man* – written by the journalist Sarah Helm, we can see different stories of the Ravensbrück camp that, according to the author “*just as Auschwitz was the capital of the crime against Jews, so Ravensbrück was the capital of the crime against women*”. Undeniably, then, the answer to the question would be no. There was no peace for women because, even after the liberalization in 1945, they had to face more sexual violence by

the Russian troops. Surviving to hell did not free them from the patriarchal holocaust.

Yet, and after the disproportionate sexual violence put forward, women were silenced, their stories and suffering set aside, greatly ignored and suppressed, out of shame sometimes, but most times as a consequence of normalizing and underestimating violence committed against women. Still nowadays, women who were outrageously violated in those concentration camps haven't had many chances of raising their voices, getting relief for those concrete crimes suffered by them, or at least having adequate psycho-social support. Actually, until 1983 with the conference "Women Surviving the Holocaust" we had almost no research on the topic.

Something very important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not to forget. Not to forget that women through history have not only had to bear the cost of war but have also been part of the battlefield. Not to forget that sometime, not many years ago, the right to justice, relief, and reparation was not provided to us. Because, as the Spanish philosopher George Santayana underlined: those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it. And, as Hannah Arendt stated, "*under conditions of tyranny, it is far easier to act than to think*".

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**Publicado por:**



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Naciones Unidas  
en España**  
United Nations Association of Spain

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