



SEXUALISED VIOLENCE DURING THE HOLOCAUST: A Historiography of Silence

Naming Sexualised Violence: Why It Matters

Sexual violence is one of the most pervasive human rights violations worldwide. It is a particularly persistent feature of armed conflicts, yet it remains common even in times of peace. The phenomenon knows no geographic or historical boundaries – it has been documented across all regions and throughout history.

Despite its prevalence, sexual violence remains heavily stigmatised. Even with growing legal recognition and public attention in recent years, shame, silence, and entrenched social taboos continue to hinder open discourses.

This silence has a long history. During the Holocaust, for example, sexual violence was ubiquitous yet rarely acknowledged. Cultural taboos and a universalised narrative of the Holocaust that left little room for these experiences actively contributed to their suppression. As a result, many accounts remained untold, or were pushed to the margins of Holocaust memory.

Writing about sexual violence means breaking this silence. It creates space for voices long unheard and acknowledges the immense harm and trauma suffered by the victims. At the same time, it broadens our understanding of the Holocaust and reveals experiences that were

long pushed aside – by society, by historians, and at times even by survivors themselves.

Only when these experiences are named can we begin to challenge the “culture of stigmatisation”^[1] that has silenced them for so long.

Definition of the Term

The term sexual violence refers to any physical, verbal, or visual act of a sexual nature imposed on a person without their consent. It serves to threaten, humiliate, or violate an individual’s sexual autonomy and bodily integrity. The term covers a wide range of acts, including not only rape, but also sexual torture, sexual humiliation, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilisation, and any other practices in which sexuality is used as a means of exercising power and harm over the person.^[2]

Sexual Violence during the Holocaust

“It was everywhere—in Buna, in Auschwitz [...] That’s a shame to tell.”^[3]

Sexual violence was a pervasive and multifaceted phenomenon during the Holocaust. It occurred with particular frequency in the Nazi-occupied territories of Eastern Europe during pogroms

and mass shootings, but it also took place in ghettos, in hiding, and within concentration camps and killing centres. Perpetrators came from a wide range of groups: members of the SS and Gestapo, Wehrmacht soldiers, German civilians, local collaborators, as well as resistance fighters, helpers, other persecuted individuals, and even Allied liberators. Some assaults were committed by single individuals, others by groups. Perpetrators included both men and women. The diversity of perpetrators highlights how complex and far-reaching sexual violence was in this period.



Interior view of a room in the camp brothel at Buchenwald concentration camp, 1943. From 1942 onward, the SS established ten brothels in camps. Access to these brothels was reserved for male prisoners who held privileged positions within the camp. More than 220 women were forced to work in the brothels.

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In the Holocaust, sexual violence included, but was not limited to, rape, sexual barter, enforced prostitution, as well as sexually humiliating acts such as forced nudity, and medical experiments targeting the reproductive organs. While girls and women from diverse social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds were particularly affected, boys and men were also subjected to such violence.

Historiography: How was this violence remembered and researched?

It is often assumed that sexual violence during the Holocaust has always been a taboo topic, something survivors rarely spoke about and scholars largely ignored. Yet a closer look at the historical record shows that the picture is far more complex.^[4]

“One constantly hears of the raping of Jewish girls in Warsaw. The Germans suddenly enter a house and rape 15- or 16-year-old girls in the presence of their parents and relatives.”^[5]

Phase 1: Wartime Documentation (1939–1945)

Even while the Holocaust was still unfolding, victims were already documenting and publishing accounts of sexual violence. One such publication was the *Black Book of Polish Jewry*, published in the United States in December 1943 by exiled Polish Jews. It contained eyewitness accounts, some of which described sexual violence in explicit detail. The editors aimed to draw international attention to the atrocities committed by the Nazis and to mobilise support from abroad.

One such account reports:

“One constantly hears of the raping of Jewish girls in Warsaw. The Germans suddenly enter a house and rape 15- or 16-year-old girls in the presence of their parents and relatives. In one mirror-shop in Świętojerska Street there was a mass raping of Jewish girls. The Germans seized the most beautiful and most healthy girls in the streets and brought them in to pack the mirrors. After the work, the girls were raped.”^[6]

Phase 2: Immediate postwar “speakability” (late 1940s)

In the immediate postwar period, a notable number of survivors spoke openly about sexual violence. During this time, large documentation projects collected their testimonies, which were often marked by a striking degree of directness.



Members of the Central Historical Commission in Munich, January 29, 1946. Between 1946 and 1948, they conducted hundreds of interviews with survivors.

CREDIT: GHETTO FIGHTERS' HOUSE MUSEUM, ISRAEL / PHOTO ARCHIVE

Although these early commissions, including the Central Historical Commission in Munich, did not explicitly ask about sexual violence, a notable number of survivors, across genders and backgrounds, still spoke about it. This indicates that, immediately after liberation, these experiences were not yet fully silenced or widely regarded as unspeakable.

Phase 3: Marginalisation (1950s–early 1980s)

This initial openness, however, was short-lived. From the 1950s onward, a long period of silence began. Until the early 1980s, sexual violence almost disappeared from testimonies and from public discussion.^[8]

One major reason was the rise of dominant Holocaust narratives. These narratives focused on certain forms of suffering and left little room for experiences that were seen as too personal, too shameful, or too difficult to talk about.

As Zoë Waxman notes:

“Traditional Holocaust narratives can make it difficult to discuss anything considered to be outside existing testimony. Witnesses may feel obliged to

stay silent about certain aspects of their experiences for fear that they do not belong to the history of the Holocaust, or that the experiences will not be easily understood.”^[9]

Silence was also sustained by broader social pressures. After the war, many survivors wanted to rebuild their lives, either in their old communities or in new ones. In these environments, there was often a strong desire, shared by survivors and by the societies, to look forward rather than revisit the most painful and intimate parts of the past. Ideas of marriage further reinforced this silence. At the time, sexuality was widely considered legitimate only within marriage. Women who spoke about sexual violence risked being stigmatised or rejected by current or prospective husbands. As a result, many felt compelled to remain silent.^[10]



A Jewish woman sexually abused by a local mob during the anti-Jewish pogrom in Lvov, Poland, July 1941.

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Phase 4: Feminist Reopening (1970s–1990s)

A significant shift began in the late 1970s, when feminist scholar

Joan Ringelheim started examining the Holocaust through the lens of gender. She was among the first to argue that men and women did not experience persecution in the same way, and that the gender of the victims shaped life under Nazi rule.

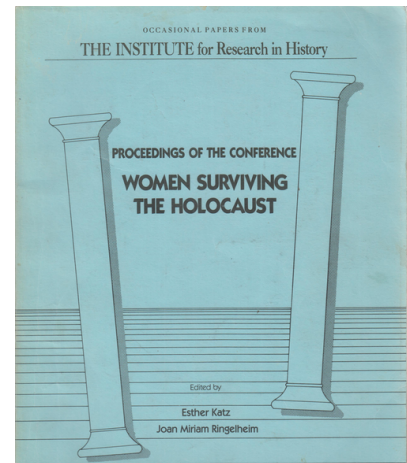
Between 1979 and 1984, Ringelheim conducted oral history interviews with female survivors and asked directly about sexuality and sexual violence. Her work was pioneering not only because she raised questions long treated as unspeakable, but also because she used a feminist interviewing approach built on trust, follow-up conversations, and treating survivors as the experts of their own experiences.

These methods created a space in which some women felt able to speak more openly. For many, this was the first time they shared experiences that had remained unspoken for decades.^[11]

A major milestone was the 1983 conference *Women Surviving: The Holocaust* co-organised by Joan Ringelheim in New York. The conference brought together survivors, scholars, and activists, creating a rare space in which women publicly discussed gender-based violence.

The event demonstrated that such experiences were not peripheral but essential in understanding how Nazi persecution affected women.^[12]

Although Ringelheim’s work was met with considerable resistance: from some historians, survivors, and members of the wider Jewish community who feared that focusing on gender might fragment the perceived unity of Jewish suffering, it nevertheless



Cover of the publication of the *Proceedings of the Conference Women Surviving the Holocaust*, edited by Esther Katz and Joan Miriam Ringelheim, publisher: The Institute for Research in History

CREDIT: ABE BOOKS

laid important groundwork for the development of more nuanced scholarship in the following decades.

Phase 5: Expansion and Diversification (1990s–present)

In the 1990s, global attention to sexual violence committed during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda and the war in former Yugoslavia renewed interest in its use as both a weapon and method of warfare.^[13] In groundbreaking judgments, the international criminal tribunals established by the United Nations for these situations recognised sexual violence as constituting war crimes and crimes against humanity,^[14] and in the case of Rwanda: also an act of genocide.^[15] This shift prompted historians to reexamine similar patterns during the Holocaust.

The first major studies on sexual violence during the Holocaust followed soon after. In 2004, Brigitte Halbmayr, Helga Amesberger, and Katrin Auer

published the first German-language study on sexual violence during the Holocaust.^[16] The first comprehensive English-language study, by Sonja Hedgepeth and Rochelle Saidel, appeared in 2010.^[17] Since then, research on the topic has grown rapidly, with important contributions by Zoë Waxman,^[18] Anna Hájková,^[19] Na'ama Shik,^[20] Doris Bergen,^[21] and others. However, for many years, this scholarship focused almost entirely on women's experiences.

Only recently have researchers such as Dorota Glowacka^[23] and William Ross Jones^[24] examined male victims more closely. Although men and boys were also subjected to sexual violence, their experiences remained especially hidden. Male survivors were often discouraged from speaking, and many lacked the language and narrative frameworks to describe what had happened to them. Public and scholarly discussions typically framed women as victims and men as perpetrators, leaving little space to acknowledge male victimhood. As a result, many men felt that their experiences did not correspond with accepted narratives of the Holocaust and could not be spoken about.

This silence was further reinforced by legal contexts. In countries where any survivors resettled, same-sex acts remained criminalised for decades after the war. Thus, for male survivors, speaking about sexual violence could carry the risk of social condemnation or even prosecution.

Although male victims existed, their experiences entered Holocaust scholarship only once

"Sexual violence against men, because it does not conform to prevalent gender norms and expectations, has been subjected to cultural and epistemic erasure."^[22]

researchers began to challenge long-standing gender assumptions and broadened the understanding of who can be a victim.

Conclusion

Sexual violence during the Holocaust was neither rare nor incidental. It formed part of the broader system of persecution, shaped by power, and the deliberate dehumanisation of victims. It affected people of all genders, ages, and backgrounds, and occurred across many contexts.

At the same time, the history of how these experiences were spoken about, or not spoken about, reminds us that violence does not end when the event itself is over.

The phases outlined above show that what survivors could say, and what historians were willing or able to hear, changed profoundly across the decades.

Today, research on sexual violence during the Holocaust continues to diversify. It draws on a wider range of sources, asks new questions, and challenges assumptions that once limited our view. This ongoing work shows that the history of the Holocaust

is not fixed. It evolves as scholars reconsider earlier interpretations and as previously marginalised voices are heard.

By tracing these changes, we gain a clearer sense of how violence is remembered, how silence takes shape, and how recognition becomes possible. Most importantly, it brings us closer to the lived realities of those who endured persecution and ensures that experiences once pushed aside are finally acknowledged.

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ENDNOTES

- 1) Mispa Roux, "Sexual Violence during Armed Conflict and Reparation: Paying Due Regard to a Unique Trauma," *African Yearbook on International Humanitarian Law* (2014): 87–110.
- 2) *Article 7 (1)(g) of the Statute of the International Criminal Court*. These acts of sexual violence are further expanded upon under the International Criminal Court's Elements of Crimes, namely *Articles 7(1)(g)- 1 – 7(1)(g)-6* at pages 5 – 7.
- 3) Interview with Sam Lubat, 47407, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, 9 Sept. 1998.
- 4) Dorota Glowacka, and Regina Mühlhäuser. "Gender-Based and Sexual Violence in the Holocaust: On the importance of Writing This History Today." *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 38, nos. 3–4 (2024): 173–180.
- 5) Jacob Apenszlak, et al., eds. *The Black Book of Polish Jewry: An Account of the Martyrdom of Polish Jewry under the Nazi Occupation*. New York: Roy Publishers, 1943, 29.
- 6) Ibid, 29.
- 7) Na'ama Shik. "Sexual Abuse of Jewish Women in Auschwitz-Birkenau," in *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe's Twentieth Century*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 221–246.
- 8) Na'ama Shik, "Description and Silence: Sexual Abuse in Early and Later Testimonies of Survivors and the Emergence of the Israeli Narrative," *Holocaust Studies* 27, no. 4 (2021): 481–494.
- 9) Zoë Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 138.
- 10) Gabriele Rosenthal, "Sexual Violence in Times of War and Persecution: Biographical and Transgenerational Long-Term Effects on Survivors of the Shoah, Their Children, and Grandchildren," in *War, Gender, and Trauma: Experiences and Reflections in Work with Traumatized Women in War and Crisis Areas*, ed. Marlies W. Fröse and Ina Volpp-Teuscher (Frankfurt am Main: IKO-Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1999), 25–45.
- 11) Carli Snyder, "Asking About the 'Unspeakable': Joan Ringelheim and Early Research on Sexual Violence and Same-Sex Practices among Women During the Holocaust," *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 38, nos 3–4 (2024): 206–224, here 208.
- 12) Ibid. 210.
- 13) Mispa Roux, "Sexual Violence during Armed Conflict and Reparation", 87.
- 14) *The Prosecutor v Jean-Paul Akayesu* (Judgment of 2 September 1998) Case No ICTR-96-4-T (Trial Chamber); *The Prosecutor v Anto Furundžija* (Judgment of 10 September 1998) Case No IT-95-17/1-T (Trial Chamber); *The Prosecutor v Dragoljub Kunarac Radomir Kovac And Zoran Vukovic* (Judgment of 22 February 2001) Case No IT-96-23-T& IT-96-23/1-T (Trial Chamber); *Sylvestre Gacumbitsi v The Prosecutor* (Judgment of 7 July 2006) Case No ICTR-2001-64-A.
- 15) *Akayesu and Gacumbitsi*.
- 16) Helga Amesberger, Katrin Auer, and Brigitte Halbmayr, *Sexualisierte Gewalt: Weibliche Erfahrungen in NS-Konzentrationslagern* (Wien: Mandelbaum Verlag, 2004).
- 17) Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2010).
- 18) Zoë Waxman. *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 19) Anna Hájková, "Between Love and Coercion: Queer Desire, Sexual Barter and the Holocaust," *German History* 39, no. 1 (2021): 112–133.
- 20) Na'ama Shik, "Sexual Abuse of Jewish Women in Auschwitz-Birkenau."
- 21) Doris L. Bergen, Sara E. Brown, Stephanie Corazza, Paula David, Henry Greenspan, and Sara R. Horowitz, "Buried Words: A Forum on Sexuality, Violence and Holocaust Testimonies," *Holocaust Studies* 27, no. 4 (2021): 501–20.
- 22) Dorota Glowacka, "Sexual Violence against Men and Boys during the Holocaust: A Genealogy of (Not-So-Silent) Silence," *German History* 39, no. 1 (March 2021): 78–99.
- 23) Ibid.
- 24) William Ross Jones, "'You Are Going to Be My Bettmann': Exploitative Sexual Relationships and the Lives of the Pipels in Nazi Concentration Camps," *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 38, nos. 3–4 (2024): 253–72.