Totalitarianism and Total War: Sexual Trauma in WWII Europe

The rise of fascism throughout Europe in the 1920s was rooted in the aftermath of World War I, namely the frustration of German people regarding the Treaty of Versailles (specifically Article 231, referred to as the War Guilt Clause). The War Guilt Clause and the Treaty of Versailles as a whole made Germany take responsibility for causing World War I, which created heightened levels of tension and frustration within Germany. As there were many factors that contributed to the start of the First World War, many Germans felt that they had been taken advantage of as a simple way to cast the blame on one country. With such tensions present in Germany and other parts of Europe, many citizens of frustrated countries were vulnerable to radical, nationalist thinking.1

The Second World War and the years leading up to it witnessed growing rates of fascism and regimes of dictatorship in different countries such as Italy under the fascist rule of Benito Mussolini, and most notoriously, Germany, under the control of Adolf Hitler. Nazi Germany was a totalitarian state, which then used the tactics of total war in the name of imperialist expansion and genocide. In fact, warring nations on both sides of the conflict used the techniques of total war during WWII. The goal of totalitarian regimes like that of Nazi Germany is complete control over every aspect of public and private life of citizenry, whereas total war is a style of war in which the combattants make no distinction between soldiers and civilians. Pierre Seel’s memoir, *I, Pierre Seel, Deported Homosexual*, published in 1995, and the anonymously written, *A Woman in Berlin*, originally published in 1953, are both first-hand accounts of just how totalitarianism and total war impact sex and sexuality, particularly in cases of violence and

abuse. During World War II, the repression and violence committed against homosexual men by the Third Reich as depicted in *I, Pierre Seel, Deported Homosexual*, represents the totalitarianism and attack on individuality in Nazi Germany. Additionally, the atrocities and sexual violence against women in Berlin nearing the collapse of the Third Reich by Russian soldiers, as seen through *A Woman in Berlin*, embodies the characteristics of total war.

Totalitarianism, referring to both fascist and communist dictatorships and regimes, worked to remove all individual freedoms and reframe every aspect of individual life, including politics, art, and private lives in the pursuit of controlling the state. Due to the drive to eliminate individuality among citizens of totalitarian rule, many individuals who were seen as deviating from what totalitarian Nazi Germany saw as the natural, preferred state—the heterosexual Aryan—were targeted and systematically eliminated. Total war can be seen as unrestricted regarding the weapons used, the territory and combatants involved, or the objectives pursued—when the laws of war are generally dismissed. This kind of all-consuming war, with objectives to completely exterminate the enemy, rather than battling to a draw or terms of treatise, was reminiscent of the gory victories of ancient military leaders like that of Genghis Khan and the Mongol invasions. The warfare and violence of World War II was without limits and without distinctions between combatant soldiers and civilians. Total war can be seen as a consequence of totalitarianism, in which it is pursued and encouraged by fascist leaders that reign under totalitarianism. When totalitarianism works to effectively eliminate individuality, it comes as no surprise that boundaries between civilians and enemies were broken—or ignored all together.

For many individuals who do not consider themselves as adhering to the standards of heteronormativity, they consider their sexual identity a significant part of their individuality and personhood. With the drive of totalitarianism to eliminate all individual expression and
freedoms, and considering the existing repression and homophobia of the mid 20th century, gay individuals—especially gay men—were at risk. The widespread denial of women’s varying sexualities and sapphic erasure saved women who existed outside heteronormativity from enduring the atrocities inflicted against gay men. Due to elements of their sexuality that they had no control over, these men were at an inherent disadvantage and automatically endangered by Nazi policies on sexuality and individual liberties. With Hitler’s rise to power and the legalized ostracism of Jews that he set in place, he also began the process of legal ostracism for homosexual men. With such policies as Paragraph 175 in the German Penal Code, which officially made sex between men illegal, the persecution of the gay community—which had begun to thrive in some countries—continued, but in manners that were protected by the legal system.² Pierre Seel, one of such homosexual men who survived the Nazi’s attempt to repress homosexuality through violence and imprisonment in concentration camps, writes of the beginning of his experience with the Gestapo, the Secret State Police of the Nazi party:

The SS man had added that in any case I was nothing but a Schweinehund—the disgusting German word was perfectly understood. And that was how, in the most humiliating manner, my family learned about my homosexuality. A horrible wound, both for them and for me. Moreover, my brother told me that since the Gestapo was a law unto itself, the attorneys they consulted had their hands tied. I was absolutely alone.³

The gay men that were subjected to Nazi violence and atrocities were seen as less than human by the Nazi officials, and every act against them was done in a manner to make clear their supposed immorality before their extermination. Seel recollects, “In their fury, they broke the rulers we were kneeling on and used them to rape us. Our bowels were punctured. Blood spurted everywhere. My ears still ring with our shrieks of atrocious pain.”⁴ Gay men were treated as

⁴ Seel, 26.
pests awaiting their removal, because in accordance to the policies of the Nazi regime and Hitler’s pursuit of the Master Race through mass genocide, there was no room for deviancy.

Whereas gay men in Nazi Germany were dehumanized because of their differing individualities and inherent defiance of totalitarian ideals of individuality, wartime violence against others could embody other political aspects. The act of total war during World War II, and the lack of distinction between citizen combatant was clear during the invasion of Berlin by Russian soldiers who committed sexual crimes and violence against women of Berlin during its occupation. After the evolving state of warfare that was seen with the advancements of World War I, with newly atrocious methods on the battlefield, such as tactics of trench and biological warfare and an increasingly degenerate notion of humanity, World War II continued the pattern of degeneracy. As stated by Annette F. Timm and Joshua A. Sanborn in *Gender, Sex and the Shaping of Modern Europe*, re-published in 2016: “It was immediately clear that this new war was different from the last. The violent tactics towards civilian populations that had been gradually and in some cases unwillingly used by army officials during the First World War had been honed and made part of strategic planning in the Second World War.” As previously stated, total war, unrestricted war that disregarded previous notions of war and the laws of war, broke down the divide between soldiers and civilians, in which casualties became a commonality, and were given little to no mind. Due to the very nature of the Second World War—that of mass genocide of any men, women, and children who were not considered part of the Aryan race that Hitler and Germany desired—the concept of civilian casualties lost much of its meaning. In many cases, soldiers were no longer serving to protect their women and children in ways they previously had, but rather to carry out a genocidal Master Plan.

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Thus, the rules of war were largely thrown out the window during World War II—both by the Nazis themselves as well as their Russian counterparts (who reached Berlin in 1945 and proceeded to sexually assault thousands of German women). The supposedly protective and patriarchal militarized state of Germany had broken down by the end of the war, with Germany’s defeat at the hands of the Russians imminent, which undermined German notions of masculinity. Timm and Sanborn write, “All the armies raped, and all promised to protect their own women. Paradoxically, the defence of civilization and the practice of rape were dependent upon one another.” The hypocrisy of aiming to protect the women of the country one fights for, and then raping and sexually abusing women of another country was astounding. From the diary entries of the anonymous author of A Woman in Berlin—who was later identified as Marta Hillers—previously held views on German men and masculinity changed from what they may have been before the occupation of Berlin by Russian forces. The author writes,

> The Nazi world—ruled by men, glorifying the strong man—is beginning to crumble, and with it the myth of “Man.” In earlier wars men could claim that the privilege of killing and being killed for the fatherland was theirs and theirs alone. Today we women, too, have a share. That has transformed us, emboldened us. Among the many defeats at the end of this war is the defeat of the male sex.

German women had lost faith in their soldiers, the men whose very duty was to protect them, because the façade of the unbreakable masculinity of men at the front line of the war had been broken. As they began to face their own defeat and inability to protect their women as patriarchal nationalism stated they should, the long instilled social constructions of manhood were extinguished. Furthermore, with the proven inability to protect women of the fatherland, other socially constructed ideologies tied into the puzzle of masculinity and manhood—like that of

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6 Timm and Sanborn, 168.
rape culture, visibility and acknowledgement of sexual assault—became more apparent; or rather, the denial of such truths became more apparent.

Too often, cases of rape and sexual abuse by soldiers during wartime were dismissed or merely seen as instances of collateral damage—an inevitable consequence of war. Attitudes towards rape and sexual conquest as part of military strategies came to the surface nearing the end of the war, when the masses were given more information on what was truly happening on the front lines and in the conquered cities. Timm and Sanborn state, “Describing the invasion of a country as a ‘rape’ was metaphoric, but journalists and state officials also argued that actual rapes were accompanying the military incursions.”

Once people became aware of the atrocities that were taking place, and they were finally being reported, some reacted to the lack of humanity, but many still ignored the issues of sexual abuse and violence. Timm and Sanborn continue by stating, “The situation was made worse by the sexual dynamic of the war zone. Sex was one of the few areas of ‘labour’ in which local women were seen to have more potential than local men. Sexual contact is a feature of all war zones, where it can run the gamut of levels of coercion, from voluntary to rape.”

The history of sex and sexuality during wartime has been prevalent in the past, with prostitution and the taking of prostitutes for soldiers on either front. In some cases, female prostitutes worked in brothels of occupied territories, or even those created within the confines of concentration camps, and could possibly receive preferential treatment in return, much like how in some cases, 17th century prostitutes would trade sex for temporary housing. Some women in occupied territories would have sexual relations with soldiers fighting for their home country, or in some cases with soldiers of the opposing side. However, despite the occurrence of consensual sexual relations with soldiers, many more women—and even

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8 Timm and Sanborn, 167.
9 Timm and Sanborn, 190.
children—were prey to non-consensual sexual violence. One of the entries from the anonymous author in Berlin states, “Hilde reported that a twelve-year-old girl in the basement who was tall for her age got dragged off in all the commotion and ‘used up’ by the Russians along with some other women.” These women and children were seen as nothing more than casualties and consequences of war by the soldiers who “used [them] up”, as the anonymous author writes.

The events that took place during, and leading up to World War II under the control of a fascist, totalitarian state led to movements of extreme sexual repression, persecution, and murder of nearly 100,000 gay men in Nazi Germany. Additionally, after the invasion of Germany by Russian soldiers, instances of rape and sexual assault of German women became widespread, with approximately 100,000 women raped in Berlin and two million in German territory—these just being instances that were reported. Such heinous crimes and acts of inhumanity during World War II were systematically ignored by the people and governments of victims of such violence, in which they were denied, invalidated, or forgotten. Up until the 1980s, the Nazi’s anti-gay policies and survivors of what was coined the Gay Holocaust remained largely ignored by historians and the masses due to it not being reported. Much of the same can be said in regards to the women of Berlin and Germany, and the countless others affected by war, who endured the Russian invasion, in which the denial of sexual abuse of women is upheld by patriarchal systems and ideals of rape culture and the stigmatization of sexual violence. In order to heal from such traumatic and violent histories, and prevent future recurrences, society must face its own past and truths—no matter how horrendous—and apply learned lessons to the ever relevant present day.

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10 Anonymous, 234.