

The Rape of Berlin

But first, we turn our thoughts to 1945, when the Red Army liberated Eastern Europe before marching on the German capital. But behind that victory, 70 years ago, there's another story that has long been repressed. Lucy Ash investigates in *The Rape of Berlin*.

So, it's nearly dusk and I've come to Treptower Park in East Berlin to see the massive monument to the Soviet war dead. I can see a man and he's holding a child. I'm Lucy Ash, looking up at a 12-metre statue depicting a Soviet soldier grasping a sword in one hand, a small German girl in the other, and stamping on a broken swastika.

This is the final resting place for 5,000 of the 80,000 Soviet troops who fell in the Battle of Berlin between the 16th of April and the 2nd of May 1945. But some call this memorial the tomb of the unknown rapist. It's lit up inside, looking like a sort of quasi-religious painting.

You can see Mother Russia in a red cloak looking down mournfully, and it says this was a war that saved the civilisation of Europe from the fascists. This is a story that includes some graphic and disturbing material. Many Russians find all mention of the rapes offensive, and they are regularly dismissed as a Western myth in the Russian media.

You certainly can't talk about what happened in Germany in 1945 in isolation. To understand the background, I've had to go to Moscow and go back in time because first there was the Nazi invasion of Russia, or in Hitler's words, the war of annihilation. I'm on my way to a suburb in northeast Moscow to meet a war veteran.

To be honest, I'm feeling a bit apprehensive, and that's because the Duma, the Russian Parliament, recently passed a law which says that anyone who denigrates the Red Army or Russia's record in what's known here as the Great Patriotic War could face fines and up to five years in prison. Ninety-two-year-old Yuri Vasilievich Lyashenko, covered in medals, has welcomed me into his cramped flat at the top of a tower block with boiled eggs and brandy. He wanted to be an engineer, but before he could enrol at university, he was called up to the army.

Yuri Vasilievich just made a toast, saying that they fought a very long, difficult war to bring peace to Europe and that he hopes there won't be a third world war. Toasts to peace were a Soviet-era cliché and often feel rehearsed, but Lyashenko's words are heartfelt. Together we take a brandy-fuelled journey back more than seven decades to the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, which made Hitler and Stalin into allies until one summer day in 1941, when the Führer launched Operation Barbarossa.

Do you remember what you were doing on the 22nd of June when the Germans invaded? Of course I do. I can picture it very clearly. Our commanders had gone off on a break, leaving us alone in our tents.

At 4 a.m., we heard the sounds of crackling and clicking, then suddenly our tents were shaking, bullets were piercing the canvas. One of his gang of four school friends found himself fighting in Byelorussia. He later wrote to Lyashenko.

He said when the Germans went through a place, they destroyed it completely. Nothing was left, just chimney stumps where houses used to be.

And it was the same story in Ukraine. Wherever the Germans went, people and villages were wiped off the map. Lyashenko was soon wounded near the Ukrainian city of Vinnitsa and nearly had his leg amputated.

After two years in a string of military hospitals, he was back in action, fighting all the way to Berlin, where we'll catch up with him later on. Three months on from the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler was lauding it as the greatest battle in the history of the world, against an enemy not of human beings but of animals. The Wehrmacht was supposedly a well-ordered force of Aryans who would never contemplate sex with Untermenschen.

But Oleg Budnitsky, an eminent historian at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, or an archive rat, as he calls himself, says the ban was ignored. Nazi commanders were so concerned about venereal disease that they established a chain of military brothels throughout the occupied territories.

Some of local women were forced to stay in this brothel, because they had no other means to survive. There were rapes also. Sometimes such cases were triggered, you know, by German military courts. According to one German judge women don't understand the concept of honor so it's not a big deal to rape. It was violation of military discipline. The violation of discipline was much worse than the violation of the actual women. Yes, exactly.

An extraordinary state commission was set up by the Supreme Soviet in 1942 to investigate crimes perpetrated by the Nazi invaders.

It contains some horrific accounts of rape and torture. Yet afterwards, few talked about what happened. Budnitsky is putting his head above the parapet by writing about wartime sexual violence.

It's not a talking matter in Russia and has only occasionally surfaced. "Babi Sarstva," or "Kingdom of Women," a Soviet film from the late '60s, shows a 15-year-old village girl helping a German soldier to learn Russian, all smiles in her cotton frock. She's correcting his accent when he tries to rape her, only for an older woman to step in and sacrifice herself.

Back in the flat in Moscow, I asked veteran Lyashenko whether he or his comrades in the Red Army thirsted for revenge. He doesn't give me a direct answer but says for him, there's no moral equivalence. Hitler instructed his army to kill off our entire population so there would be no Russia.

But our political management worked with the civilians and army. Rape and other crimes were dealt with in military units by the authorities. In theory, civilians were protected by a decree from Stalin, and military tribunals could order summary executions of anyone who broke the rules.

One officer observed soldiers complaining, "Some commanders, they'll shoot their own men over a German bitch." The political department of the 19th Army also declared that a true Soviet soldier would be so full of hatred that he'd be repulsed by German women. But despite decrees and deterrence, we know that Soviet troops took their revenge on women.

What we don't know is the number of those assaults. Soviet military tribunals during wartime remain classified. Oleg Budnitsky says there are other ways to recapture the past.

There are a lot of unpublished diaries and memos written even in the Soviet period without any hope of publication. Literally, in every diary of a Soviet soldier who was in Germany at that period of time, it is possible to find pretty frank descriptions of atrocities. Remarkably, I've had access to the typescript of a wartime diary kept by Lieutenant Vladimir Gelfand, a Jewish teenager and staunch Stalinist.

Despite the ban on diaries as a security risk, he told it like it was throughout the war. I rang his son Vitaly, now living in Berlin, who made a discovery when clearing out his father's papers after he died. He was young and fearless, only 18 at the beginning, not much more than a kid.

With war going on every day, you don't think what you're writing could be dangerous for you. Vitaly reads to us from the manuscript, an unvarnished picture of disarray in the regular battalions. 20th July 1942, Belinsky village.

"The troops are clapped out. Many have changed into civilian clothes. Most have thrown down their weapons.

Some commanders have torn off their insignia. Such shame. Such unexpected and sad discrepancy with newspaper reports."

Gelfand describes the miserable rations allotted to frontline troops being ravaged by lice and men stealing their comrades' possessions, even their boots. But in autumn 1944, as the Red Army advanced into what the Soviet press called the lair of the fascist beast, posters ordered them to offload their feelings onto the enemy. "Soldier, you are now on German soil.

The hour of revenge has struck." The Red Army moved west with staff battalions at the front, made up of prisoners and other undesirables who could be sacrificed to minefields. Hundreds of thousands of German civilians fled before them, abandoning houses full of provisions that astonished, delighted, but also angered the Soviet troops.

For the first time in their lives, eight million Soviet people came abroad. The Soviet Union was, you know, a closed country. And what they, you know, knew about foreign countries was that there was, you know, unemployment, starvation, exploitation, and so on and so forth.

And when they came to Europe, they saw something very different from Stalin's Russia. And especially Germany, they were really furious because they could not understand why, being so rich, Germans came to Russia. Anger at the Germans wasn't the only motivation for sexual violence.

Anyone left behind was ripe for plunder. World War II historian Anthony Beevor reads from a high-level Soviet report about the treatment of women who'd been freed from Nazi prison camps. "In the town of Bunzlau, there are over 100 women and girls in the headquarters, but there is no security there.

And because of this, there are many offences and even rape of women who live in this dormitory by different soldiers who enter the dormitory at night and terrorise the women." Maria Shapoval said, "I waited for the Red Army for days and nights. I waited for my liberation, and now our soldiers treat us worse than the Germans did.

I am not happy to be alive." Beevor unearthed some more disturbing documents in the state archive of the Russian Federation. They date from late 1944 and were sent by the NKVD, the secret police, to their boss, Lavrentiy Beria, in Moscow.

Now, their reports to Beria, and these were passed on to Stalin, and you can actually see from the ticks whether they've been read or not, reported the mass rapes in East Prussia and the way that German women would try to kill their children and kill themselves. The Third Reich propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, seized the opportunity to portray the enemy as bestial. In this episode of the Nazi newsreel *Deutsche Wochenschau* from November 1944, the camera lingers over corpses of women and children in the village of Nemmersdorf.

And curiously, the first reaction in Germany was not to take it too seriously because they felt it was the propaganda ministry. The reality only really started to hit when the refugees from East Prussia started to arrive in mid to late January and early February 1945, with their stories of what had been happening in East Prussia, Pomerania, and, of course, Silesia. And that is when I think that the women of Berlin started to realize what they were about to face.

Standing in front of the rather tinny diorama of the Battle of Berlin in Moscow's huge Second World War museum, I try to imagine how Yuri Lyashenko felt after four years of combat. Did you see them putting the flag on the Reichstag? No. When the flag was being put on the Reichstag, we were still fighting on all different floors and rooftops.

And how did you feel when you saw that red flag? We were all shouting, "It's ours, it's ours, it's ours." There was such a feeling of, how can I put it, glee, pure glee. Everything flew into the air.

Soldiers shot into the sky from pistols, from machine guns, from rifles. Some were even shooting from cannons. But they had to be careful because people could get hurt.

Berlin was the final point. When Prime Minister Winston Churchill announced victory in Europe on the 8th of May, he underlined the nation's gratitude to the Red Army. "Today, perhaps, we shall think mostly of ourselves.

Tomorrow, we shall pay a particular tribute to our heroic Russian comrades whose prowess in the field has been one of the grand contributions to the general victory." While the Allied leaders were clinking glasses of champagne, brandy, or vodka, on the streets of Berlin, it was anarchy. Anthony Beevor says many battle-weary soldiers sought oblivion in drink.

And he quotes from the Soviet Union's best-known war correspondent, Vasily Grossman. This desperation for alcohol even led them to drinking the formaldehyde, the stuff they found in laboratories. Even on the day of victory, Vasily Grossman describes how these guys found these cans of chemicals in the Tiergarten in Berlin and started drinking it.

And they all went blind, mad, and were killed as a result. To some inebriated soldiers, women were spoils of war, along with watches and bicycles. Others behaved very differently.

Veteran Yuri Lyashenko remembers doling out bread, not revenge. We couldn't feed everyone, of course. But we shared what we had with children.

I remember the little children who were terrified. I remember the look in their eyes. It was awful.

I felt sorry for them. But you've doubtless heard that many women were raped at the time by Soviet soldiers. I'm not sure.

Well, we didn't have anything like that in our division. But, of course, such things did happen. It all depended on the character of the people.

People were different everywhere. One man would help, and another would abuse. Man's intentions aren't clearly written on his face, so you wouldn't know.

For many women, memories of the sexual violence have for years been buried just beneath the surface. But like the countless bomb shelters in Berlin, they're still there. In a well-heeled street in Charlottenburg, the neighborhood security guard Lutz takes me down to one of these basements.

Go on. Some red brick steps leading down into the lower doorway. I have to crouch down.

Lutz says there were metal bunker doors here that could be slammed shut. What secrets does this cellar hold? I could picture it thanks to a diary kept by one woman during the liberation, which later became a bestseller, although for decades nobody knew her name. She eyes herself and her fellow cave dwellers in the bomb shelter with a wry detachment.

The young man in grey trousers and horn-rimmed glasses, who on closer inspection turns out to be a young woman. Three elder sisters, all dressmakers, huddled together like a big black pudding. Then there's me, a pale-faced blonde, always dressed in the same winter coat.

The anonymous author was a well-traveled journalist in her early 30s. She started writing on April 20, 1945, just ten days before Hitler's suicide. It's implied that she'd supported the Nazi regime.

"I breathe what was in the air," she reflects, and so it would seem hard to identify with her. Yet I found myself drawn in by her honesty and her flashes of gallows humor. As the cave dwellers await the arrival of the Red Army, they joke, "Better a Ruski on top than a Yank overhead."

Rape is preferable to being pulverized by bombs. But when soldiers try to haul women out, they beg the diarist to use her Russian language skills and complain to a Soviet officer. And she manages to find one.

Apparently, Stalin has declared that this kind of thing is not to happen. But it happens anyway. The officer shrugs his shoulders.

One of the two men, being reprimanded, voices his objection, his face twisted in anger. "What do you mean? What did the Germans do to our women?" He's screaming. "They took my sister and..." The officer calms the men down and gets them outside.

The baker's wife asked hoarsely, "Are they gone?" I nod, but just to make sure, I step out into the dark corridor. Then they have me. Those men were lying in wait.

The diarist is brutally raped and nearly strangled. The cave dwellers, to save their own skins, had shut the basement door against her. Finally, the two iron levers open.

I start yelling, "You pigs! Here they rape me twice in a row and you shut the door and leave me lying like a piece of dirt." Meanwhile, on the outskirts of Berlin, our 22-year-old Red Army diarist, Lieutenant Vladimir Gelfand, was whirling around on a bicycle, the first time he'd ever ridden one, when he came across a group of German women carrying bundles. 25th of April.

I asked the women in broken German why they'd left their home. And they told me with horror about the first night of the Red Army's arrival. "They poked here," explained the beautiful German girl, lifting up her skirt.

"All night. They were all spotty ones. And they all climbed on me and poked.

No less than 20." She burst into tears. "They raped my daughter in front of me," her poor mother added.

"And they can still come back and rape her again." This thought horrified everyone. "Stay here," the girl suddenly threw herself at me.

"Sleep with me. You can do whatever you want with me, but only you." Gelfand's description of the traumatized girl and her mother corroborates the woman diarist.

She realizes that she needs to find one high-ranking wolf to stave off gang rape by the male beasts. And the relationship between aggressor and victim becomes more transactional and more ambiguous.

By no means could it be said that the Major is raping me. Am I doing it for bacon, butter, sugar, candles, canned meat? To some extent, I'm sure I am. In addition, I like the Major.

And the less he wants from me as a man, the more I like him as a person. The diary powerfully shows how new relationships emerge in the rubble of a broken city. And political loyalties are jettisoned as Hausfraus snip swastikas out of red flags and replace them with the hammer and sickle.

When the author's fiancé returned from the Eastern Front, she handed him her pile of notebooks. I could see that Gerd was taken aback. "You've all turned into a bunch of shameless bitches, every one of you in the building.

It's horrible being around you." And she got the same reaction from the German reading public when the diary was published in 1959. No wonder she stopped its reprint until after her death.

But how far can we trust her version of events? I needed to find someone who could tell me face to face about what happened in the German capital. Of course, most of the women who were raped at the end of the Second World War are no longer alive, but we have managed to track down one victim. She's now living in Hamburg.

And so I've taken a train two hours north of Berlin to meet her and to hear her story. Ingeborg Bullert, a sprightly woman wearing a big gold brooch with a surprisingly firm handshake, has welcomed us into her apartment, and she's making us coffee. Her living room is lined with photos of cats and books about the theatre.

Ingeborg was 20 in 1945 and dreamt of becoming an actress. She'd passed her audition in the regime's Reichstheaterkammer and got a grant. But she was also pregnant by a married man who was fighting on the Eastern Front.

"What was your situation? You were living with your mother?" "On the 11th of April 1945, I had my baby and I had to leave the hospital right after delivery to give space to people that were hurt by the Russian bombs. I still see myself walking along the street with a tiny baby in my arms. And when I arrived home, I directly went down to the cellar.

There was no water, there was no electricity. And I remember when we were going to the toilet, emptying the buckets out of the window." Ingeborg lived in Fasanenstrasse, an upmarket street in Charlottenburg.

Suddenly, in this civil neighborhood, there were panzer troops and many, many corpses lying around from Russians and Germans. You know the Stalin pipe, the special noise of flight bombs from the Russians? It sounded like... When Ingeborg got back from the hospital, her neighbors glanced disapprovingly at her newborn son and said they didn't think he'd survive down in the bomb shelter. In comparison, the enemy seemed benign.

"I remember the first Russian that came into the cellar was a female soldier. I had the baby in a basket, and she was very warm-hearted and asked how old it was." Ingeborg's second encounter with the Red Army wasn't so pleasant.

"She'd left the cellar to run upstairs to look for a piece of string to use as a wick. Suddenly, there were two Russians. Well, if I had stayed in the cellar, this wouldn't have happened to me.

And they were pointing their pistols at me, the Russians. I was looking good at that time. I was young.

And one of them forced me to expose myself, and he raped me. Then they changed places, and the other one raped me as well. But they did not hurt me in a sadistic way.

They only followed their sexual desire. I still remember I thought I would die. They would kill me."

"You kept it secret almost all your life. My mother was even running around boasting that her daughter hadn't been touched. It was kind of difficult to tell anybody or her about what had really happened."

"Did you realize that other women and girls in Berlin were also being raped?" "It was a citywide known fact. All women between 15 and 55 had to go to the doctor to get this certificate and be tested for sexually transmitted diseases. If they didn't have the certificate, they didn't get the food stamps."

And I remember well that all the doctors doing these certificates had full waiting rooms. What was the scale of the rape? The most often quoted number is a staggering 100,000 women in Berlin and two million on German territory. That figure, still hotly debated, was extrapolated from scant surviving birth and abortion records.

But what else can these documents tell us? I've come to the very imposing red brick building that used to be a munitions factory, but it's now the Landesarchiv, the state archive of Berlin. I'm met by archivist Martin Luchterhahn, who's going to show me a cache of abortion records from Neukölln, just one of Berlin's 24 districts that miraculously survived intact.

In front of us on the table here, there are three blue cardboard folders. Letters from July 1945 until October, I think. The third person on the list here, Frau Simon.

It says that she was six to seven months pregnant. Yes, she just said she was raped by some Russians. And that's enough for the doctors to decide.

That shows how severe the situation was and that they really wanted to help them. Because before this special situation, how easy was it to get an abortion in Germany? Was it quite straightforward or not? In a way, it was impossible. Article 218 of the Strafgesetzbuch says that it is illegal to do an abortion.

In the time of the Nazis? In the time before the Nazis, in the time of the Nazis, in the time after the Nazis. There was a small window for those women because of that special situation of the mass rapes in 1945. Altogether, 995 pleas for abortion were approved by this one office between June 45 to 46.

It's quite overwhelming. The files contain over a thousand fragile scraps of paper, all different colors and sizes. A litany of misery in childish round handwriting or old-fashioned spiky German.

What's that story? Eiderstadt. I swear, yeah. I swear that I have been raped on the 20th of February, 45 by Russian soldiers.

So it was the flat of my parents, and they were in that room at the same time. So they witnessed the rape? They witnessed the rape, yes. Americana.

Ah, an American. What does that letter say?
There was some small party in September '45.

They also drank a bit, and then she was raped by an American, and the evening had consequences. It seems like she had gone willingly to a party. And so the doctors have to decide whether they believe her or not.

The term "raped by a Russian" was accepted as a reason, but what about the other soldiers in Berlin? So what about those other soldiers? Here's BBC correspondent Richard Dimbleby reporting from Berlin in July 1945 as the Western Allies were moving in. The people move about in apathy, as though they can't take in all that has happened. Only the younger girls seem to have the energy to smile at American and British soldiers, but then somehow they always do.

Rape was not limited to the Red Army. Bob Lilly, a historian at Northern Kentucky University, had access to the records of US military trials. His book, *Taken by Force*, was so controversial that initially no American publisher would touch it, and it came out first in France.

Lilly estimated there were 14,000 rapes committed by GIs in England, France, and Germany between 1942 and 1945. The rapes that took place in England were very few, but once the soldiers crossed the English Channel, you saw a spike in rapes. The rapes became a problem for public relations as well as for discipline in the army, and Eisenhower said, execute the soldiers where they committed the crime and publicize the executions in such publications as the military's newspaper called *Stars and Stripes*.

There was a great, huge spike in Germany. And were any soldiers executed for rape alone? Oh yes. But not in Germany? No.

No soldier was executed for raping or murdering a German citizen. New research on sexual violence committed by all the Allied forces is still emerging. But the rapes, once the stuff of water pump conversations in the aftermath of liberation, slid under the official radar.

Few reported it and even fewer would listen. It wasn't until 2008, when many victims had already died, that psychologist Philipp Kuvert was the first to conduct scientific research into this trauma. Sometimes in the papers, they wrote that it was a taboo, but it was not a real taboo, I find, because a real taboo is something you almost don't know.

As a child, I knew that there were mass graves. It was not hidden, so to speak. But on the other side, there was never a possibility to give the survivors an official acknowledgment somehow.

Yet in 2008, there was a movie adaptation of the anonymous Berlin woman's diary called *Anonyma*. It didn't quite capture the unsentimental tone of the book, but it had a cathartic effect in Germany, encouraging women like Ingeborg to start talking. We made a kind of press conference, and then the next day I sat here in this room and the phone rang and rang.

In his clinic at the University of Greifswald, surrounded by a leafy park, Philipp finally assessed just 27 elderly patients. Social acknowledgment is, he says, the big

step in the healing process. But as with many families in Germany and Russia, the trauma was closer to home than the psychologists realized.

What I find extremely touching and also difficult is last year I had a meeting with my eldest brother in Berlin where we had some wine and then he suddenly told me that our father, as a boy during their flight from Western Prussia, had to witness the rape of his mother by a Russian soldier. I was somehow shocked. My brother said, oh Philipp, I thought that you conducted the study because you knew it.

Across the old Soviet Union, the 9th of May was celebrated as Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War, as it still is today, with the intensity of a religious ritual. Vitaly Gelfand, son of our Red Army diarist, Lieutenant Vladimir Gelfand, doesn't deny that many Soviet soldiers showed great bravery and sacrifice in World War II. But that's not the whole story.

People weren't marching around in iron clothes. They didn't face death with stern smiles and songs about their motherland. There was everything.

Cowardice. Meanness. Hatred.

Looting. Betrayal. Desertion.

Theft among soldiers and officers. Alcoholism. There were rapes, murders.

There were military awards given to those who didn't deserve them at all. Recently, Vitaly did an interview on Russian radio, which triggered some anti-Semitic trolling on social media, saying the diaries are fake and he should clear off to Israel. He's trying to get it published in Russia, but that could be a long way off.

If people don't want to know the truth, they're just deluding themselves. The entire world understands it. Russia understands it.

And the people behind those new laws about defaming the past, even they understand it. We can't move forward until we look back. One final scene.

Lilienthal Strasse Cemetery. Tucked away here is the only public inscription I can find that mentions the rapes. I'm with Elfriede Muller from Berlin's Public Art Bureau.

Very close to the gate, there's a granite stone and there's a big wreath with cream and yellow and red flowers and a ribbon with the German flag. Can you read me the inscription, Elfriede? "Against war and violence. For the victims of expulsion, deportation, rape, and forced labour.

Innocent children, mothers, women, and girls. Their sufferings in the Second World War should be unforgotten to prevent future suffering." And you could quite easily walk past it, couldn't you? I think it's not really a memorial.

It's a kind of collective grave. "The Rape of Berlin" was presented by Lucy Ash. The producer was Dorothy Fever.

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