

Anonymous. (2005). *A Woman in Berlin: Eight Weeks in a Conquered City, a Diary* (P. Boehm, Trans.). New York: Henry Holt.

Silencing Reports of Sexual Assault

The Controversy Over *A Woman in Berlin*

September 25, 2005. The communication in the *New York Times Book Review* got my attention. Hans Magnus Enzensberger (2005b), one of Germany's most noted poets and essayists, was responding to an earlier letter from one Christoph Gottesmann, attacking the anonymous diary, *A Woman in Berlin*, that had been published in the United States the previous month. The *Times Book Review* had published a rave appraisal of the diary in mid-August.

I vaguely remembered the book and its review. The memoir describes the multiple rapes of the author and other women in Berlin at the hands of advancing Soviet soldiers in the spring of 1945. Within the past several years, reputable historians have verified that approximately 2 million German women were rape victims, between 95,000 and 130,000 in Berlin alone, suffering at the hands of the million troops who came through the city (Judt, 2005).

When I tracked down a copy of Gottesmann's (2005) letter to the *Book Review*, I found that, based on its anonymous nature and particular publication history, the Viennese resident challenged the entire authenticity of the diary: "Until a serious and critical edition of the diaries of the *Woman in Berlin* is published," he concluded, "this book should be regarded as a work of fiction rather than fact" (p. 6).

In researching further on the Internet, I learned that several years ago a German journalist (Bisky, 2003) also cast doubt on the book, again without offering a scintilla of evidence. What was it about this diary that provoked such discomfort? It seemed to me that the reaction to the book was almost as interesting as the work itself, displaying as it does discomfort with the stark facts of sexual assault and its purposes. As Irish novelist John Banville (2005) wrote in a favorable review of the book for the *Irish Times*, "It is an irony that 60 years after it was written, men were still disputing over this compelling, shocking and courageous testament of suffering and survival."

A Woman in Berlin is a diary kept for 8 weeks, beginning April 20, 1945, by a German woman in her early 30s, who, as a result of travel to the Soviet Union, speaks some Russian. Seven days from the start of the diary, two Soviet soldiers grab her in her basement bunker and forcibly and brutally rape her. Only several hours later she is attacked again. At her request, the Siberian rapist keeps the other men,

also looking for action, at bay. As a result of these encounters, the author is sore inside and out, reporting that her own skin and body now disgust her. She describes the sensation of dissociation she uses to escape the harsh reality—the daydream of her mind floating above her body:

Of course, it's just a fantasy, a pipe dream, a means of escape—my true self simply leaving my body behind, my poor, besmirched, abused body. Breaking away and floating off, unblemished, into a white beyond. It can't be me that this is happening to, so I'm expelling it all from me. (p. 61)

Two days later it happens again:

No sound. Only an involuntary grinding of teeth when my underclothes are ripped apart. The last untorn ones I had.

Suddenly his finger is on my mouth, stinking of horse and tobacco. I open my eyes. A stranger's hands expertly pulling apart my jaws. Eye to eye. Then with great deliberation he drops a gob of gathered spit in my mouth. (p. 63)

This proves a turning point. Once Anonyma has recovered from her dizziness and nausea, her gagging and throwing up, she reaches a decision, one that she later learns many other girls and women made as well.

Damn this to hell! I say it out loud. Then I make up my mind.

No question about it: I have to find a single wolf to keep away the pack. An officer, as high ranking as possible, a commandant, a general, whatever I can manage. After all, what are my brains for, my little knowledge of the enemy's language? (p. 64)

Thus, in this chaotic and dangerous time, the diarist chooses to do what she needs to survive. The German men still around, she makes clear, do nothing to protect their wives, daughters, and sisters. She finds a high-ranking Soviet officer in the neighborhood and makes herself available to him. He in turn keeps the other men away while providing needed food. Certainly she recognizes that she should call herself a whore, “since I am essentially living off my body, trading it for something to eat” (p. 116). She did not like having to do it. “It goes against my nature, it wounds my self-esteem, destroys my pride—and makes me physically miserable” (p. 117). But her will to survive is strong—“against all sense and reason, just like an animal” (p. 261).

Throughout the diary, the author's tone is matter of fact and unsentimental. Without, surprisingly, a hint of self-pity or sense of entitlement, she notes the many survival strategies the women and girls employ to remain alive and physically unharmed during a time of widespread violence against them. The diary is an astonishing eyewitness account that puts the reader in the shoes of the women of Berlin, a document of the barbarities the military is capable of inflicting on civilians, and a strong anti-war statement.

In late June, the diarist's fiancé, Gerd, returns from the war. He hears the stories, and he reads some of the diary. His response is chilling, and he disappears, never to be seen again. "'You've turned into a bunch of shameless bitches, every one of you in the building. Don't you realize?' He grimaced in disgust. 'It's horrible being around you. You've lost all sense of measure'" (p. 259). The author realizes that no German wants to touch someone who has been raped by Soviet soldiers, so the women, already raped and shamed, are doubly ostracized.

Enzensberger (2005a) explains that the diarist contemporaneously recorded her observations, writing with a pencil stub by candle light. Later, she turned her scribbling and jottings into a more formal, typed diary. Both notebooks and the typescript exist, currently in the possession of the widow of Kurt Marek, a journalist and critic who persuaded the author to publish the diary and helped her ready it. In 1954, Marek was able to place the work with a U.S. firm, which published it anonymously. Five years later, it appeared in an anonymous German edition, but only a Swiss publisher would bring it out. The German response, such as it was, was severely negative. Some cited the author's shameless immorality; others accused the author of "besmirching the honor of German women" (p. xv).

The diary disappeared without a trace, but photocopies did circulate in Berlin among students and feminists in the late 1960s. When, in 1985, Enzensberger wanted to reprint the work in his own publishing venture, now a part of the Frankfurt-based Eichborn Press, Marek's widow explained that the author did not wish to see the book republished in her lifetime, a reaction to the opprobrium it had engendered when it first appeared.

In 2001, Ms. Marek advised Enzensberger that the author had died at age 90 and the work could now appear, but anonymously, honoring the author's wishes. She also informed Enzensberger that the author had approved any and all changes now in the typescript, all minor. The work appeared in 2003 in Germany and soon shot to the best-seller lists, where it remained for some weeks. This time the reviews were positive, helped no doubt by a small wave of books and articles examining crimes against German civilians, such as the bombing of German cities in the waning days of the war.

Then on September 24, 2003, journalist Jens Bisky (2003) struck back in a full-page essay in one of Germany's major newspapers, Munich's *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*. Bisky claimed that as an anonymous diary the book "as an historical document was worthless." Reviewing the publication history, Bisky stated he believed it to have been printed in 1954 at the end of the Korean War as a piece of anti-Soviet propaganda, depicting the "Red Apocalypse" descending on Berlin. By this time, he wrote, Marek had settled in the United States. What better way to solidify his position there by publishing this propagandistic book?

Bisky also insinuated that it was possible that Kurt Marek had taken the notes and constructed the typescript himself or had completely overhauled them. His suspicions were aroused because in 1941 Marek published a propagandistic narrative of German soldiers in the form of a diary, in which Marek admitted he had altered the names of

almost all the persons and their characters. Bisky went further, claiming that there was no proof and hence no certainty of the identity of the diary's author, calling into question its authenticity. Enzensberger was negligent, he later told the *Observer* newspaper. "He has made a mistake. He wasn't careful enough in editing the book. It is important we judge it as history and not as a novel" (Harding, 2003).

Based on a tip, Bisky outed the diarist as an experienced German journalist who undertook propaganda work for the Nazi regime and who later married, moved to Switzerland, and died in 2001 at age 90. And in his article he published her name and a full biography.

Bisky's accusations infuriated Enzensberger (personal communication, December 10, 2005), who strongly believes that we should continue to honor this rape victim's request for anonymity. To his mind, Bisky seemed to find a particular satisfaction in investigating and publishing the name of this rape victim, in seeking "to discredit" and "debase" or bring her down, which he found "disgusting." The aggressive tone of Bisky's text Enzensberger also found remarkable. Enzensberger has informed me that Bisky is a man of the Left whose motivations may be to deflect criticisms of the Red Army that defeated fascism that "might amount to minimizing Nazi crimes." In the 1950s, he told me, Anonyma's message could not be heard: German women are pure, and one could not even think about them being sullied by Bolsheviks. Now her words were condemned as anti-Soviet propaganda.

Bisky's broadside led to another round of articles in the German press in the fall of 2003.¹ Some of those to which I had access found Enzensberger's reaction to be inappropriate, disproportionate, and puzzling, demonstrating the critics' (both men and women) gross ignorance of the crime of rape and the plight of sexual assault victims in society (Maerz, 2003). Others understood the issue but believed that authenticating the document trumped concerns about divulging the identity of the victim (Esch, 2003). Still others found Bisky's queries over the book's provenance to be legitimate (and unanswered) but did not see how identifying the author by name helped his case because such an experienced journalist he named could certainly have written this masterpiece (Guentner, 2003).

The attack on the book freed up at least one journalist (Hartwig, 2004), a woman, to remark that the real question is: Is it possible for a woman who was raped to so coolly report on her victimization? In other words, responding to rape with something other than the anticipated and hence stereotypical reaction (presumably hysteria) opens a woman up to claims of falsification or lack of authenticity.

In his letter to the *Times*, Gottesmann (2005) repeats the Bisky line. He identifies the putative author, queries the authenticity of the handwritten notes and the relationship of the notes to the printed version, and declares that doubts about changes made during the editing process remain: "This book is a very dubious companion if one wants to know what was really going on in those days in Berlin" (p. 6).

Enzensberger (personal communication, December 10, 2005) continues to believe that the book speaks for itself. It is superfluous, he says, to defend it against these accusations of lack of authenticity. Those who have read the work will immediately

understand. For one thing, there is a unique, consistent tone running through the diary—dispassionate, unsentimental, unsensational, cool, unself-pitying—one that would be difficult for an editor to invent. For another, the author comes across as a remarkably independent and plucky person. If someone had helped her edit her jottings and turn it into a full-fledged diary, what is wrong with that? As Enzensberger writes, “Who has read her book, knows, that it involves a brave and self-aware woman, who would never have let anyone interfere with the text.” I would add, interfere with the text without her permission or approval.

Nor can it be easily believed that Marek—or anyone else who had not been in Berlin at the time—could have described so many different people and detailed so many unusual and horrific events. At one point, the author describes one grueling episode: “Writing this sends shivers down my spine. No one could invent a story like this: it’s life at its most cruel—mad blind circumstance” (p. 197). The unbelievable barbarity is, indeed, beyond invention. In his German review, writer Hans Peter Roentgen (2003) makes the point this way:

And the discussion, instigated by the SZ, whether the book is authentic or had been reworked by author Marek, seems to me to be fully off the mark. Because no one doubts that this sketches a genuine picture of the spring of 1945. Whom does it interest, whether the author wrote it herself or whether Marek worked on it, or proofread it?

That is what Enzensberger means when he says that the book speaks for itself.

Enzensberger (2005b) remains to this day puzzled by a critic who calls a book a fake without proffering any evidence for the allegation. “That a rape victim who preferred not to reveal her identity should be obliged to face a public trial by the press is an idea that I find rather repellent” (p. 6), he wrote to the *New York Times*. To me (Enzensberger, personal communication, December 10, 2005) he added, “In the background of all this is, I think, a lingering tendency to blame the rape victim—an attitude which is rooted in a long and disgraceful tradition.”

Indeed, unless rape victims act in stereotypical ways—resisting, suffering injuries, having nervous breakdowns—their responders today still seize the opportunity to minimize the event and shame and condemn the victim, as German men did in Berlin after the war and in the years following and indeed up to the present day. In September 2005, for example, ex-prisoner Roderick Johnson’s case against Texas prison officials for failure to protect him against prison rape came to trial. In pretrial testimony, one defendant explained that Mr. Johnson’s account was not credible to prison authorities because he had failed to resist the men he said had raped him, and for that reason Johnson had not been moved to safekeeping, a housing unit reserved for vulnerable gay men, despite his numerous written grievances and requests. “Sometimes an inmate has to defend himself,” the official said. “We don’t expect him not to do anything” (Liptak, 2005, p. 14). The jury agreed with the Texas officials, ruling against Mr. Johnson’s claims in a 10-to-2 vote.

In Oregon in December 2005, a 19-year-old woman was convicted of filing a false police report in a rape case. As a 17 year old, she claimed that her 18-year-old boyfriend and his two friends sexually assaulted her. In explaining his verdict, the judge said there were many inconsistencies in the stories of the four and that he found the young men to be more credible. He also relied, he stated, on the testimony of a police detective and the women's friends who said the teen girl did not act traumatized in the days following the incident (Anderson, 2005).

And in the United Kingdom at the end of 2005, a judge directed a verdict in favor of a defendant who allegedly raped a woman while she was drunk and passed out. The justice ruled "drunken consent is still consent," prompting a firestorm of criticism among the bench and bar about judges' lack of understanding of rape law and outmoded attitudes about women, all of which we call rape myths (Dyer, 2005).

Given the intense reaction in certain quarters to *A Woman in Berlin*, I have asked two men, noted experts in violence against women, to read and respond to the book. Keith Bletzer brilliantly summarizes the coping strategies the women in Berlin used during the rapes, elucidating the complexities of the response that in turn caused so much confusion for readers and opprobrium for the author. In his contribution, Jim Messerschmidt continues my theme by reacting to noted Oxford historian Antony Beevor's comments in the introduction to the diary. Messerschmidt finds with Beevor, the very military historian renowned for his documentation of the rapes in Berlin, a surprising lack of understanding of sexual assault and acceptance of rape myths, showing just how far we have to go to educate even the more informed public about the nature and purpose of sexual assault.

I am writing this just as James Frey's best-selling recovery memoir, *A Million Little Pieces* (Wyatt, 2006), has been attacked as fiction. Unfortunately, the author's embellishments of his own story may cause more memoirs to be called into question, giving those not wishing to hear particular messages grounds for questioning the veracity of eyewitness reports as exaggerations. Frey's actions may provide ammunition for those wishing to silence those who have been victimized.

We have seen how the writer of *A Woman in Berlin*, surrounded by disbelief and contempt, was publicly silenced, a process that has unfortunately continued even beyond her death by attacks on the man responsible for republishing it. Some of the responses discussed in this essay continue the shameful history of discrediting rape reports and minimizing the effects of sexual assault. Catherine MacKinnon (2005) has eloquently described the effects of these charges.

Speech about violence against women in America is not free. It can cost your reputation, your ability to survive, and a lot more. The press could make it less expensive. When sexual abuse can be freely spoken about, it can be stopped. (p. 351)

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Note

1. For those who read German, a collection of some of the reviews of *A Woman in Berlin* can be found at http://www.larlindo-correia.com/eine_frau_in_berlin.html. A Google search turned up some additional Web sites and reviews. Because I could not be certain that I had been able to get access to and read all the German articles and reviews, I have not attempted to determine what percentage of the articles were positive and what percentage were negative. All of the reviews found before Bisky's (2003) article were favorable. All translations are my own.

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