

Feminist Interpretations of Holocaust History

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The emergence of the study of the history of the Holocaust following the “silent years”, which occupied nearly two decades of the post-war era, coincided with the second wave of feminism. Despite the creation of the discipline of Women’s and Gender Studies and the emerging variety of women’s history within post-secondary institution, discussion of women in the Holocaust did not become a part of the discourse of history until the late seventies. In addition to the lag in addressing the study of the history of women in the Holocaust, the application of feminist theory to Holocaust history was late to the academic conversation. Feminist history of the Holocaust was finally studied in the early eighties, in order to better understand not only women in the Holocaust but also the Holocaust more generally. However, the discourse failed to evolve and diversify as quickly as other forms of feminist history. As a result of the perceived exceptionality of the Holocaust within the context of history and even within the more specified picture of the history of genocide, the application of feminist theory as well as the understanding of the experiences of women and the implications of gender within the Holocaust remain relatively stunted within the context of Holocaust and feminist history.

It must be acknowledged that, even though application of feminist theory within historical discourses has only been a relatively recent occurrence, the representation of women was not entirely excluded from historiography prior to second wave feminism. Initial histories of women “treated women according to masculine standards of significance”, which placed their worth on their ability to perform idealized masculine norms.¹ As a result, only “exceptional” women who denied their femininity made history. The fact that the statement; “well-behaved women seldom make history” has been appropriated in a way that supports the antithesis of the original author, Laurel Ulrich, exposes how, despite Ulrich’s attempts to rectify the historical oversight that various

¹ Jill Matthews, “Feminist History,” *Labour History* 1, no. 50 (1986): 147.

women existed in the past, this statement is still found within popular discourses of history.² These discourses relied on the social construction of what constitutes acceptable behaviour, as well as what constitutes unacceptable behaviour. In this instance “behaving” relies on adhering to traditional notions of femininity and remaining within the private sphere. “Problematic” women of the past, such as women who publicly embraced their femininity, or participated in deviant activities, were categorically not “well-behaved” however not in way that was in line with traditional “masculine standards of significance”.

In the context of the Holocaust, early historians inferred that the extent of the destruction of the Jews of Europe was a result of their own inability to act in resistance. Violent resistance is categorically within the realm of “masculine standards of significance” and therefore such historians participate in not only the practice of victim-blaming (which is a notion that has its own gendered implications), but also accusations of a lack, or loss of masculinity by the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. This accusation is explicit when Bruno Bettelheim asked in 1971 “why did so few of the millions of prisoners die like men?”³ This question may not have weighed so heavily on Bettelheim had he realized that over half of all of the victims of the Holocaust were, in fact, not men. He goes on to identify a woman who violently resisted against an SS officer after being forced to dance for him, resulting in the SS officer’s death and ultimately her own. “Bettelheim criticizes the Jews for not acting like men, yet praises a female dancer for acting like a man and even makes her an example of ‘manhood.’”⁴ Bettelheim’s interpretations of the Holocaust as a successful attack on Jewish masculinity, is a reflection of the widespread refusal to acknowledge women’s unique victimization during the Holocaust. Jewish women’s experience of the Holocaust was not the result of Jewish men’s failure to maintain their masculinity, rather Jewish women suffered at an intersectional level due to their Jewish identity and their gender. One identity cannot be disentangled from the other, therefore Holocaust history must acknowledge both.

² Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735,” *American Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1976): 20.

³ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart* (New York, 1971), 258 quoted in Joan Ringelheim, “The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust,” para. 15, recreated from *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 1, no. 1 (1984): 69-87, <http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/site/pp.asp?c=gvKVLcMVIuG&b=394977>

⁴ *Ibid*, para. 16.

As the discourse of the history of the Holocaust progressed into the 1970's, the notion of victim-blaming as a result of a presumed lack of masculinity gave way to the emergence of a supposed gender-neutral perspective of the Holocaust, which did not possess the problematic accusations of previous discourses. However, it resulted in the Holocaust being viewed as a universal experience for both men and women. By claiming gender blindness, historians, by default, ignored the experiences of women, as they became "obscured or absorbed into descriptions of men's lives".⁵ By the early 1980's Holocaust historians began to recognize the gap in scholarship surrounding women and gender. It is at this point that Holocaust history had caught on to the concepts of women's history and feminist history. The two varieties of history, though similar, are not the same. Understanding the differences is imperative to understanding the historiography of women in the Holocaust. Jill Matthews aptly explains the difference:

To put it simply: women's history is that which seeks to add women to the traditional concerns of historical investigation and writing; feminist history is that which seeks to change the very nature of traditional history by incorporating gender into all historical analysis and understanding. And the purpose of that change is political: to challenge the practices of the historical discipline that have belittled and oppressed women, and to create practices that allow women an autonomy and space for self-definition.⁶

Despite this simple distinction, it is necessary to note that there exist a variety of different feminist methodologies that are often at odds with one another. However, within the context of early feminist histories of the Holocaust this diversity is a casualty of the slow pace of change that typifies Holocaust discourse. Initially, feminist Holocaust historians were tasked with combating the problem of only "exceptional" and not "well-behaved" women who peopled the writings of history. As a result there was an embracing of traditional feminine qualities and roles, expressed and inhabited by the survivors. The method of *Alltagsgeschichte*, the history of everyday life, was employed by feminist Holocaust historians in order to highlight the collective female experience of the Holocaust.

⁵ Joan Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," *Signs* 10, no. 4 (1985): 741.

⁶ Matthews, "Feminist History," 148.

Joan Ringelheim later critiqued and denounced the use of these methods as a cultural feminism.⁷ Ringelheim's arguments will be addressed later within this analysis.

The reactions and obstacles of writing a feminist analysis of the Holocaust are, at times, constitutive of each other. The context from which early feminist Holocaust historians were writing within was the Cold War, which created the conditions necessary for the *Historikertreit*, the historian's quarrel. Liberal Holocaust historians criticized conservative Holocaust historians of using their interpretation of the Holocaust in order to make political arguments against Communism when they made claims that Nazism was established solely as a response to Stalinism. The atmosphere in the late 1980s, which questioned the ethics of the combination of politics and the Holocaust, was the result of the *Historikerstreit*. The consciousness-raising nature of feminist history was denounced as propaganda by conservative critics of feminist theory. This outdated argument was later restated by Gabriel Schoenfeld in his article "Auschwitz and the Professors", in which he not only dismissed feminist and women's Holocaust history, but also Women's and Gender Studies as a discipline in its entirety.⁸ Though Schoenfeld's argument was immediately dismissed by reputable historians,⁹ the restatement of the argument against the application of feminist theory to the Holocaust exposes the durability of critiques of feminism. An explanation for the large gap of time which occurred between the broader implementation of feminist history and its application to the Holocaust is found in the apprehension of scholars and survivors alike regarding the investigation of issues of sex and gender, fearing that "gender-specific focusing has the potential to denigrate the Holocaust, reducing it to sexism".¹⁰ Opponents of feminist history took up this argument, insisting that "talking about gender distracts from the fact that all Jews were destined to die" regardless of if they were men or women.¹¹ Ringelheim's response typified how feminist historians dispelled this notion: "To the Nazis, Jewish women were not simply Jews; they were Jewish women,

⁷ Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," 741-761.

⁸ Gabriel Schoenfeld, "Auschwitz and the Professors," *Commentary* 105, no. 6 (1998): 44.

⁹ Sara R. Horowitz, "CONTROVERSY: A Response to Gabriel Schoenfeld." *Prooftexts* 21, no. 2 (2001): 279-83.

¹⁰ Joy Erlichman Miller, *Love Carried Me Home: Women Surviving Auschwitz*, (Deerfield Beach, Fla.: Simcha Press, 2000,) xxiv.

¹¹ Lisa Pine, "Gender and Holocaust Victims: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 1, no. 2 (2008): 123.

and they were treated accordingly in the system of annihilation".¹² It is necessary to focus on gender, particularly the perspective of women, because the differing social construction of gender roles and norms created vast differences in how the events of the Holocaust were experienced by men and women.

An aspect of history which nearly always necessitates addressing of women in the past is the history of sexuality. The persistence of asserting Holocaust history as gender-neutral, is in part due to the lack of research focused on sex and the Holocaust, in conjunction with misconceptions regarding fascism and sexuality. Officially the Nazi party prohibited sexual contact between German soldiers and "ethnically alien women".¹³ The policies regarding the regulations of German soldiers and civilians laid the foundation for the assumption that fascism and Nazism were categorically sexually repressive, closing the door toward any exploration into the history of sexuality in the holocaust. Dagmar Herzog debunked this notion in her book *Sex after Fascism* in which she describes how "racism of any kind has necessarily always been also about sex, this was especially true for national socialism".¹⁴ Herzog explains within the Third Reich sex and sexuality was used in a manner that celebrated the Aryan *Volk*, while simultaneously demonized Jewish sexuality. She cites several propaganda campaigns which depict male Jewish sexuality as a violent affront to the female German purity, invoking images of rape, and pedophilia.¹⁵ In the 1960's, the New Left's efforts to critique conservative values of regarding sexual liberation resulted in an association between sexual repression and fascism. In reality the notion of the Nazis as sexually repressive was constructed in the post-war period.¹⁶ Many survivors have since spoken about the feeling of the sexual abuse they endured during the Holocaust as being unimportant within the larger story of the Holocaust.¹⁷ By focusing solely on the ways in which Nazis demonized male Jewish sexuality, the historical narrative has had the

¹² Joan Ringelheim, "The Split Between Gender and the Holocaust," in *Women in the Holocaust*, edited by Dalia Ofer, and Lenore J. Weitzman, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998,) 349.

¹³ Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011,) 86.

¹⁴ Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005,) 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 139-140.

¹⁷ Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," 745.

effect of silencing the victims of sexual abuse from within the Jewish community within the Holocaust, out of the fear of continuing the perpetuation of this anti-Semitic stereotype.¹⁸

In Joan Ringelheim's groundbreaking 1985 article, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research", she focuses on the gendered dimension of resisting previously used problematic methodologies of history.¹⁹ She criticizes her own and other feminist Holocaust history research for assuming a cultural feminist approach. Cultural feminism developed from, and in many ways in reaction to, radical feminism. Where radical feminism takes a political approach, cultural feminism is an "attempt to transform feminism from a political movement to a lifestyle movement".²⁰ In feminist Holocaust historians attempts to avoid the previous method of writing women in history by identifying those who were not "well-behaved" they made an "unconscious use of cultural feminism as frame through which to view Jewish women survivors".²¹ Feminist historians were focused on the ways in which women and men experienced the Holocaust differently and their different ways of surviving. Jewish women survivors were cast as mothers, nurturers and sisters, bonding in order to survive, resulting in the universal acceptance that women "survived better" by both scholars and survivors (women and men).²² Jill Matthews identifies feminist history as being analytical, while women's history is empirical.²³ It is necessary to have the empirical discoveries of women in the context of the past, in order to analyze them through a feminist lens. Ringelheim asserts that the cultural feminist argument that women "survived better" exists without any empirical evidence, and historians lack critical evaluation of the survivor testimonies in regards to how they presented their experiences.²⁴ Cases of women fighting for survival at the expense of others are ignored within this cultural feminist framework.²⁵ Once again problematic women are excluded from history. By focusing on what they viewed to be the unifying

¹⁸ Ringelheim, "The Split Between Gender and the Holocaust," 340.

¹⁹ Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," 742.

²⁰ Brooke, "Retreat to Cultural Feminism," in *Feminist Revolution: Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Random House, 1975,) 79, quoted in Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," 753.

²¹ Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," 753.

²² *Ibid*, 746.

²³ Matthews, "Feminist History," 150.

²⁴ Ringelheim, "The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust," para. 7.

²⁵ Pine, "Gender and Holocaust Victims: A Reappraisal," 135.

factors of the female experience of the Holocaust feminist historians ended up practicing the exclusivity they criticized.²⁶

While the difficulty of critically analyzing the evidence regarding the behaviour of Holocaust victims is enormous on its own, the early historiography of the Holocaust which participates in victim-blaming complicates the matter. Historians do not work within a vacuum and as such they must be aware of previous discourses and how their arguments fit into them. Feminist historians have the added complexity of dealing with the “double-jeopardy” concept in which Jewish women of the Holocaust face oppression both as Jews and as women, from the external source of the Nazis as well as from within their own Jewish communities. Ringelheim posits that the way in which cultural feminist history deals with this issue results in the valourization of oppression,²⁷ turning the Holocaust into a story of gain and survival, when it is, by its very nature, a story of loss and death.²⁸ Susan E. Nowak reaffirms Ringelheim’s argument in 1999 when she stated that “critical feminist theory- and here I differ from cultural feminists- repudiates any justification or legitimization of suffering.”²⁹

In reference to the story of why Holocaust survivors choose to portray their experiences in the manner in which they do, Ringelheim asks “Do we have the right as researchers to uncover this story? An obligation?”³⁰ As researchers, uncovering this story would involve questioning the motivations and validity of the Holocaust survivor testimony. The “Departures: New Feminist Perspectives on the Holocaust” conference, which took place in 2001, was an attempt to address the various issues that Ringelheim questioned, as well as utilize a feminist approach to survivor testimony that was not strictly academic.³¹ It was at this conference that Karyn Ball made her observations which would provide the foundations for her arguments regarding the nature of the relationship

²⁶ Ringelheim, “Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research,” 755.

²⁷ Ibid, 758.

²⁸ Ibid, 757.

²⁹ Susan E. Nowak, “In a World Shorn of Colour: Toward a Feminist Theology of Holocaust Testimonies,” In *Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation*, ed. Esther Fuchs, (Lanham: University of America Press, 1999,)34.

³⁰ Ringelheim, “Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research,” 759.

³¹ Lisa Disch and Leslie Morris, “Departures: New Feminist Perspectives on the Holocaust.” *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture* 20, no.1 (2003); 9-19.

between the feminist scholar and the Holocaust survivor.³² Ball invokes the Foucauldian concept of power/knowledge when discussing how feminist historians deal with survivor testimony, specifically in the context of a conference. She compares the conference to the painting “The Agnew Clinic” which she describes as an “ominous nexus of corporeal objectification and voyeurism”.³³ She recognizes that, while the painting depicts white male medical professionals viewing an operation on an exposed woman’s breast, the conference she attended in 2001 comprised of “compassionate feminists” listening to the testimony of woman survivors of the Holocaust.³⁴ She asserts that, though this compassion is a sincere occurrence, it is also prescribed by the very nature of being a Holocaust scholar “confirming [her] membership in a professional community while reinforcing the Holocaust’s value as an object of inquiry.”³⁵ Ball continues that is necessary for feminist Holocaust scholars to recognize within themselves that the Holocaust has become an object of desire, both within popular and academic contexts.³⁶ This desire becomes a regulatory power in the behaviour of the scholar which supports the power/knowledge structure of the conference, which “induce[s] the survivor to perform in front of an audience that reciprocally feels authorized and/or obliged to listen.”³⁷ A recognition of the regulatory power created by the desire surrounding the Holocaust within the ‘Departures’ conference is a specific instance when the assumed exceptionality of the Holocaust invades a feminist space of academia, shaping the behaviour of both the survivor and the scholar. Ball has built upon the concept that not only are the experiences of the men and women who were victims of the Holocaust influenced by their gender socialization and that of their perpetrators, but also the testimony of those who survived was equally influenced by their gender socialization. Feminist Holocaust historians must reconcile the gender socialized testimony with the widespread view of the Holocaust as separate within history and humanity.

³² Karyn Ball, “Unspeakable Differences, Obscene Pleasures: The Holocaust as an Object of Desire.” *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture* 19, no. 1 (2003): 20-49.

³³ *Ibid*, 21.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 22.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 25.

³⁶ *Ibid*.

³⁷ *ibid*, 27.

Women's and feminist history seek to redefine the ways in which history constitutes significance. However, it is worth noting the implications that studying women, gender and sexuality have for the traditional issues of the Holocaust. Doris L. Bergen asserts that the "consideration of these sidelined issues sheds light on at least three major debates in Holocaust historiography: How did the killers carry out their task? Who collaborated and why? And do we need victim's voices to understand genocide?"³⁸ Herzog's investigations into sexuality of the perpetrators of the Holocaust help to better understand the motivations and actions of those involved. By opening up the discourse surrounding gender and sex in the Holocaust, more opportunities are created to allow for new testimony to be heard. However, it is necessary to understand that gender socialization does not get overridden by the experiences of surviving the Holocaust, and in many ways it can be expanded. The researcher must recognize the power structures which influence not only themselves, but also the survivor's testimony. By listening to the testimony of the women of the Holocaust definitions of what it means to be a perpetrator, a bystander and a victim must be rectified to acknowledge their experiences. It is with this newly defined terminology that the experiences of women can finally be integrated into the history of the Holocaust, and not merely stand apart. The perspective of the Holocaust as an exceptional event within history, combined with typical political and ideological resistance to the application of feminist theory to academic scholarship, resulted in Jewish women of the Holocaust remaining largely ignored by scholars, and once addressed their experiences were not treated with the empirical and analytical parameters which are demanded of by feminist historical practice. Since the late 1980s, attempts to uncover Jewish women of the Holocaust in academic scholarship remain scattered and achieve varying success, as the long shadow of cultural feminism remains cast over feminist Holocaust history. It is within the context of the 'Departures' conference and its own evaluation which allows for feminist historical research to expand within the greater study of the Holocaust.

³⁸ Doris L. Bergen, "What Do Studies of Women Gender and Sexuality Contribute to Understanding the Holocaust?," in *Different Horrors, Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust*, edited by Myrna Goldenberg, and Amy H. Shapiro, (Seattle: U of Washington, 2012,) 17.

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