

REARTICULATING THE EXPERIENCE OF WAR IN ANONYMA: *EINE FRAU IN BERLIN*

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Ich werde häufig gefragt, wie ich auf das Thema [Massenvergewaltigung zu Ende des 2. Weltkrieges] gekommen bin. Ich dagegen frage mich, warum es nahezu fünfzig Jahre lang kein Thema war.

Helke Sanders (in Johr/Sanders 2005, 9)

Introduction

The question posed by Helke Sanders above is a crucial one, indeed. Today an abundance of war memorials, feature films, museums, novels, memorial websites, and even computer games constantly reiterate the heroic sufferings for a collective cause endured by various nations' soldiers. At the same time, and with the exception of tremendously atrocious "modernist events" (Tozzi 2012, 3) such as the Holocaust or Hiroshima, comparably few monuments remind of the fate and suffering of other, civilian groups affected by warfare. And hardly any take up the issue of rape as a feature of war.

The present contribution focuses on one of the latter stories – the diary written by an anonymous German woman who survived the Soviet occupation of Berlin in the spring of 1945. I will direct attention to two German editions of the diary (Anonyma 1959 and 2003) and to the release of a feature film that adapted the written work to screen (Färberböck 2008). Employing the concept of the border as a frame for analysis I will, firstly, conceptualize the historical condition of the Anonyma as a precarious liminal sphere of transition between competing sovereignties that dislodged her political status as citizen and reconstituted her as bare life in the sense of Agamben (1998). In the case of rape this new status decisively hampered individual women's ability to maintain their corporeal integrity – to control the borders of their own bodies. However, the story of the Anonyma attests to the fact that the affected women did not passively endure their victimization, but actively engaged the narrow frames set by the historical situation to improve their status and regain a limited form of control and the ability to protect those in their care. This fact alerts us to a blind-spot in the thought of Agamben, namely a lack of attention to the individual subjects who enact and resist the sovereign relation of the ban in and through everyday practices. Secondly, I direct focus to the relationship between the personal story of the Anonyma and a historical Master narrative pertaining to the period. With the republication in 2003 and the adaptation to screen in 2008, the witness account of the Anonyma crossed the border into popular culture and public debate. What was marginalized before and silenced with reference to an indelible stain of German guilt and individual shameful behaviour, now became accepted as a tragic collective ordeal the survival of which claimed, indeed, heroic deeds and sacrifice – not of soldiers, but of female civilians. Initially however, some words on the relationship

between popular culture and historical discourse, and a brief historical contextualization seem appropriate.

Revisiting the Past: History, Film, and Popular Culture

In his attempt “to bring the practice of history kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century”, Robert A. Rosenstone (2006, 3) asserts the significance of film for historical discourse and politics. Rather than dismissing historical feature films as merely “fanciful or ideological renditions of history” (5), he argues for the political relevance of audio-visual representations of the past for what he at a different occasion terms a “postliterate world” (Rosenstone 2001, 50). According to Rosenstone, the feature film has an (often implicit or subtle) effect on the viewer. Therefore, the historical profession is bound to take these films, and the way they affect the spectator and frame the past, seriously. However, he concedes that “*the rules of engagement with the stuff of the past*” (Rosenstone 2006, 8; emphasis in original) are different for film compared to historiography. In contrast to the historical profession, the historical feature film not only constitutes facts in that it picks out certain traces of past events and highlights them as important, but in addition invents facts “that are not meant to provide literal truths [...] but metaphoric truths which work [...] as a kind of commentary on, and challenge to, traditional historical discourse” (8-9). On the basis of this he makes “the case for film as a new form of historical thinking” (9).

Kaes (1989) argues in a similar direction when he asserts a “special role” (x) of the filmmaker and the feature film in public negotiations of national identity. In his detailed study of the multiple discursive interplays between German cinema and collective commemoration of the Nazi era, he asserts that

feature films [...] not only reach a much larger popular audience than, say, speeches, conference papers, or books; they also tend to move and manipulate spectators in a more direct emotional way [...] and offer ambiguous perspectives and contradictory attitudes that resist simple explanation (x).

Precisely because historical feature films – and expressions of popular culture more generally – are fictitious reinventions they enable a more comprehensive view on the past and make possible the development of narratives that speak to large audiences.

Even though it has to be conceded that Rosenstone’s and Kaes’s frameworks at times seem to make it difficult to draw a clear distinction between metaphorical re-inventions of a contingent past and deliberate propagandistic distortions or blunt falsifications, I agree with their overarching argument regarding the relevance of the feature film, and fiction more generally, for historical discourse and memory politics. Popular culture demands a sound scholarly engagement with the ways it frames common understandings of a shared past.

In adopting this focus, the present article aligns to a series of studies that have provided arguments in a similar direction. From Marika Sturken’s (1997) study of the various mutual entanglements of historical discourse with cultural products, via Alison

Landsberg's (2004) notion of fiction as a form of *prosthetic memory* that enables a "deeply felt memory of a past event through which [one] did not live" (2), to Astrid Erll's (2010) attention to the "pluri-medial networks" (395) through which particular cultural expressions' inherent "potentials for memory-making" (395) are realized and maintained over time, the significance of cultural products for processes of collective identity formation and historical self-understanding has been widely acknowledged. What we read in books or see on screen, it seems, matters for how we reinvent the past. And these reinventions, again, frame the politics that shape our future.¹

On the basis of these considerations, I argue that book and film discussed in the present article, indeed, function "as interventions in cultural and political life" (Kaes (1989, x). Max Färberböck's film *Eine Frau in Berlin* ([*The Downfall of Berlin*] Germany 2008) reenacts a concrete past event on the basis of a historical document – the Anonyma's diary – and this way increases the narrative's availability and potential impact. The fact that a story that had been suppressed and excluded from common historical discourse for decades was adapted to screen for mainstream cinema witnesses of the growing significance of her narrative for German memory politics.

On the other hand, the screen adaptation carried with it an increased fictionalization and inevitable embellishment of the shattering original account. In crossing the boundary between an allegedly factual document and partly fictitious reenactment, the narrative also exchanges the immediate day-to-day perspective of a directly involved witness with the long-term retrospective perspective of a commentator with the ability to oversee the whole historical period as well as the history of the reception of the earlier publications. This way, the invented facts and "metaphorical truths" (Rosenstone 2006, 8) of Färberböck's adaptation impact historical discourse and public commemoration of the period in a different, and no less efficient, way than the preceding written publications.

Pains of an Unacknowledged Past: A Brief Historical Contextualization

This article is about a difficult issue – the mass rape of predominantly German women at the end of the Second World War. Even though this atrocity arguably constitutes one of the "most upsetting crimes" committed during this war (Münch 2009, 9),² the fact that in Berlin alone at least 110.000 women and girls had been often repeatedly raped in the spring and early summer of 1945 has for a long time hardly been debated or even acknowledged in German historical discourse.³ Even today, these numbers generate considerable debate and at times vicious criticism.

¹ For a study attesting to the various interplays between film, historical discourse, and politics in the case of the conflict in Northern Ireland see Pöttsch (2012a).

² All translations from German are my own. Original reads: "Die Massenvergewaltigungen deutscher Frauen und Mädchen 1944/45 gehören zu den schlimmsten Verbrechen, die im Zweiten Weltkrieg begangen worden sind".

³ The numbers are taken from Jahr/Sander (2005, 54; for their methodology and results for other areas see in particular pp.46-73). See also Münch (2009, 41-50).

This lack of scholarly and public attention has many reasons. The reluctance of victims and perpetrators to confront what happened, the generally low amount of photographic or other evidence, and the chaotic situation in war-torn Europe in 1944/45 certainly play an important role.⁴ In addition, however, a specifically German complex of factors contributed to a general silence surrounding the issue; the tremendous atrocities committed by the Germans during the Second World War for a long time forestalled the representation of Germans as victims. However, as for instance Münch (2009, 27) convincingly argues, the attempt to balance the sufferings of the German civilian population against the horrors of the concentration camps or the acts of genocidal warfare wielded by Wehrmacht and SS in Eastern Europe is not a viable option. Even though the traumatization and brutalization caused by German conduct certainly has significant *explanatory* power, the committed atrocities cannot be instrumentalized to *legitimate* the suppression of equally traumatic experiences of a whole generation of women and children who had to bear the main burden of the last months of warfare.⁵

The traumatic memories of women and girls who had been raped by occupying forces had no place within the frames of the dominant public discourses on the second world war in post-war Germany. Within the frames of a thesis of collective guilt their fate was seen to relativize Nazi crimes and therefore to facilitate a reemergence of a German national project that might entail a repetition of catastrophic past wrongs.⁶ On the other hand, the idea of a ‘Stunde null’ – a start from scratch after 1945 – implied the reinstitution of a patriarchic hegemonic masculinity that was severely threatened and undermined by these women’s experiences and performances. In the former GDR the ideology of socialist brotherhood impeded any criticism concerning the behavior of soldiers of the Soviet Union – “the decreed brother state” (Dahlke 2007, 41) – during

⁴ For the reasons of what he terms “Darstellungsdefizite” (24), see for instance Münch (2009, in particular pp. 26-29 and 51-68).

⁵ For studies covering the Soviet occupation of Germany see for instance Nawaratil (1982), Naimark (1995), Sennerteg (2001), Beevor (2002), and MacDonogh (2009). For one of the few studies where the Soviet side is presented in detail see Merridale (2005). All the mentioned publications direct considerable attention to the issue of mass rape. For detailed studies of German atrocities in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union with considerable emphasis on sexual violence see for instance Angrick (2003) and Mühlhäuser (2010). Pohl’s (2008) otherwise comprehensive overview in comparison dedicates little attention to the issue of rape and sexual abuse. Most recently, the quantitative data analysis of wiretapped conversations between German soldiers in American and British military confinement have revealed unique insights into the particular cultural and mental frames that facilitate also sexual abuse in war (see in particular Neitzel/Welzer 2011a: 217-229). With reference to the issue of rape Neitzel/Welzer (2011b:16) point out that “for many [German] soldiers it was normal to use the structure of opportunity of war for sexual adventures and that the transition from visiting a brothel to committing rape was often blurred” (my translation). Unfortunately, similar sources concerning the conversations of Soviet soldiers are not available.

⁶ For a sensitive treatment of the question of German guilt see for instance Jaspers (1946) who distinguishes between a criminal, moral, political, and metaphysical dimension of guilt.

and after the war. In all these cases the memories of the victims were marginalized and suppressed and did not surface in public discourse and debate for many years to come.⁷

As a consequence of this, the various individual destinies of the victims never became part of public discourse. These “unmentionable facts” were treated as “marginal historical phenomena [...] as inevitable biproducts of warfare” (Schmidt-Harzbach 1984, 51). In post-war Germany – East and West – the issues of “rape and sexual collaboration were taboo subjects in the post-war period, when men firmly reasserted their authority” (Beever 2005, 3). The “concerted silence” of the German public (Johr/Sanders 1992, 13)⁸ provides the background for the first German edition of the Anonyma’s diary in 1959.

Dahlke (2000a, 276) argues that rape in war is at the same time a deeply personal experience and a public, historically constructed and highly symbolic event. Mass rape as a means of warfare signifies the total emasculation of the enemy. Within such discursive frames women become mere objects – “spoils of war” (Dahlke 2000a, 276). In this context, the suffering heroine who sacrifices her corporeal integrity in deploying her own body to avoid massive and unchecked abuse and to provide food and protection for those in her care do not fit even the most innovative script for a popular war story. However, as the previous section has argued, popularity is an important factor for the capacity of disparate witness accounts to become readily available and widely distributed cultural memory that makes an impact on historical discourse and political practice. In the following, I will trace the gradual emergence of the narrative of the Anonyma in German historical discourse. At first, however, the question of what makes her story so peculiar requires some attention.

Between Sovereignties: Transitory Zones of the Exception

The diary of the Anonyma is a reflected, unadorned, and personal account of an educated German woman who survived the battle for, and occupation of, Berlin in the spring of 1945. Her work tells a shattering story of suffering, humiliation, violence, repeated rape, and death, but also of an unbendable will to survive, adapt, cope, and go on. Her personal notes were written between April 20 and June 22 1945 and chronicled, and commented upon, the events in Berlin in that period. In July 1945 the anonymous author sifted through her loose notes and sketches and rewrote them for her boyfriend in case he should return.

Among other issues, the diary of the Anonyma also chronicles the transition between two competing sovereignties. The author describes her crossing of a border between a crumbling German state and an emerging Soviet-controlled occupation. Her border-crossing, however, does not imply an intended movement across a predefined line demarcating different territories, but resembles an involuntary act of endurance – a being crossed by the border in form of the rapidly moving frontline – that fundamentally

⁷ For a comparison of the public treatment of mass rape in East and West Germany see Dahlke (1999 and 2000b).

⁸ “das konzertierte Schweigen”

changes her legal-political status. From being the citizen who enjoys certain forms of legal protection and (however limited) political rights she is transformed into an object – a mere body that can be mistreated or killed without legal consequences for the perpetrator. To understand the relational logics involved in this process a brief digression to the thought of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben seems appropriate.

On the basis of the distinction in Greek between *zoe* and *bios*, Agamben (1998) introduces the categories of *bare life* and *qualified life* to understand the relation between sovereign power and the political subject. While *zoe* “expresses the simple fact of living”, *bios* refers to a life “proper to an individual” (Agamben 1998, 1). The first form of life can be taken without committing homicide, while the latter is protected by a legal state apparatus. Agamben connects sovereign power directly to the production of bare life. According to him, “sovereign is he who decides on the value and nonvalue of life as such” (Agamben 1998, 142), i.e. sovereign power is the power to distinguish between bare life and qualified life – to define the state of the exception in which life can be taken or abused without legal consequences.

The diary of the Anonyma enables a perspective on a subject that – through an involuntary border-crossing – becomes excluded bare life that is located in a transitory zone of the exception between two competing sovereignties. Besides illustrating the historical context of such a transition, her story also moves into sight an active confrontation of this new, imposed status by various female subjects. In doing so, the Anonyma’s diary throws light upon a blank spot in the thought of Agamben – namely the issue of agency of the constitutively excluded subject and the possibility of pockets of resistance beyond the gaze of a monolithic centralized sovereign.

Huysmans (2008) asserts that for Agamben the “defining problem of politics [...] is the relation between sovereign power and biological life” (166). This focus, however, the author argues, “tends to politically neutralize the societal as a realm of multi-faceted, historically structured political mediations and mobilizations” (166). The Anonyma and her compatriots, however, reconstitute themselves as active political subjects in precisely such a societal sphere that remains operative even without the determinate frame of an operating sovereign. This way, these women enact what Marchart (2010) with reference to Hannah Arendt’s thought terms a “minimal politics” that is set apart from both the “grand politics” of sovereignty and exclusion and the “micro politics” of the private sphere.

This leads over to the question of how resistance can be conceptualized within Agamben’s framework. Edkins and Pin-Fat (2005) argue for two ways of resisting the power of the sovereign to define the exception; the “refusal to draw any line between *zoe* and *bios*, inside and outside” (14) and the deliberate “*assumption of bare life*” (15; all emphasis in original) by political subjects. These forms of subversion put emphasis on the inherently political nature of sovereign line-drawing that (b)orders life as such, without however dislodging the logic of the ban. It is apparent that the situation of the Anonyma poses difficulties for the forms of resistance suggested by Edkins and Pin-Fat. The women described in the diary could not resist sovereign power by means of subversively adopting the status of bare life or by simply not acknowledging the status

imposed upon them. Therefore, the case of the Anonyma brings into view a different way of conceptualizing resistance that questions the implied dichotomy between Agamben's two forms of life.

Zevnik (2009) challenges the underlying binary opposition in the thought of Agamben and criticizes the way through which Edkins and Pin-Fat (2005) reiterate this dichotomy through their conceptualization of resistance. As such, Zevnik (2009) suggests a "possibility of resistance to sovereign power that entails the emergence of a new kind of being [...] that brings to the forefront a 'subject' [...] whose existence no longer requires the intervention or recognition of sovereign power" (85). Zevnik's conceptualization of a "whatever being" (85) in-between the extremes of bare life and qualified life leads to a reconceptualization of the sovereign ban as a relation of power that acts upon the agency of subjects who cannot be grouped into such neat categories as *bios* and *zoe*, but who are constantly positioned along a scale between these extremes and who challenge, and act against, these positionings. The historical condition described by the Anonyma can be conceptualized as the struggle of such *whatever beings* who, through a minimal politics, actively engage the relations of power that reduce their status to bare life.

The diary begins with the description of the German state's waning authority perceived from a bottom-up perspective. The Anonyma describes her gradual stripping of rights, attachments, and basic goods. Notions of property dissolve and emotional attachments to objects and other human beings slowly degrade: "one only loosely connects to things now, does not clearly distinguish between own property and that of others [...] Heart, pain, love, desire. Strange and remote expressions" (Anonyma 2003, 11). A breakdown of mass communication leads to an increased concentration of daily life in the immediate neighbourhood. As established conventions break down, money loses its value and individuals are cast back to the "absolute value" of coal and bread (21). When the last remnants of bureaucracy and state administration disappear, former citizens of an urban centre revolve into "cavemen [...] a people of mutes" (13) without contacts to, or responsibilities for, others than the own community that is defined by the location of the closest air-raid shelter. This development increasingly deprives people of their legal-political status: "No orders, no news, nothing. [...] We have suddenly become individuals, not of German Descent [Volksgenosse] any more. [...] The cave-crowd, the family, just like in ancient times" (30). At a later stage she announces: "We no longer exist as a people, we are only population" (207).

The crumbling German state loses its grip and its ability to protect its citizens. As the frontline moves over them the remaining civilians are caught in a liminal zone of the exception. People become objects – mere bodies that can be killed or abused without legal or other consequences. The Anonyma describes her situation as follows "I am a puppet without emotions, shaken, pushed about, a thing made of wood" (81) and later on "we are without rights. Prey. Dirt" (90). She expresses "disgust for being sent from hand to hand, humiliated, degraded to sexual object" (115). These quotations indicate a transformation of the Anonyma and her compatriots from *bios* to *zoe*, from politically qualified and legally protected citizen to bare life, and adds a distinctly gendered dimension to this process.

The individual women described in the Anonyma's diary, however, do not silently endure their victimized and oppressed position, but actively engage their situation in attempts to replace the dissolved order with new socio-political frames that would increase their leeway and ensure fundamental protection and care for themselves and those dependent upon them. The women attempt to secure the partial and temporary protection of various males who vicariously enact the sovereign exception. As such, after having been raped and humiliated several times the anonymous author comes to the conclusion that she has to ensure a fundamental form of protection in actively engaging her tormentors: "I need to find a wolf that keeps the wolves away" (74).

What emerges through the narrative of the Anonyma are two distinct strategies of resistance that are implemented by the women in and through everyday practices to engage their status as bare life; 1) a differentiation and purposeful engagement of Russian soldiers and, 2) a conscious collectivization of the traumatic experiences combined with a form of mocking gallows humour. While the first strategy incorporates individual perpetrators in a form of protection racket that increases the leeway of individual women and improves their ability to sustain themselves and those close to them, the second strategy leads to a certain 'normalization' of the abuses within a fellowship of self-empowered co-sufferers and facilitates individual attempts to voice and thereby process and overcome the experienced ordeals. Both strategies, however, point beyond the thought of Edkins & Pin-Fat (2005) and direct attention toward a form of resistance as conceptualized by Zevnik (2009) where *whatever beings* effectuate a minimal politics that actively engages the forces enacting and upholding exclusionary frames.

The first strategy of survival entails a differentiation of the anonymous mass of perpetrators. "In spite of the fact that I feel fear, fear, fear [...] I speak to them [Russian soldiers] as human beings speak to other human beings, distinguish the worst from the tolerable, subdivide the swarm, gain a picture of them" (88). This way the Anonyma enables an individualization of Soviet soldiers effectuating the sovereign exception. In differentiating a faceless crowd into named individuals she opens up a societal sphere where social roles and patterns of behavior can be renegotiated and changed in and through a minimal politics. Accordingly, her strategy results in a gradual improvement of the situation – "a new state of affairs" (128). Massive and unchecked rape is increasingly replaced by a form of coerced prostitution that enables an exchange of sexual intercourse for protection, food and other necessary goods. Certain flats are transformed into secured pockets of protection within a transitory zone of the exception where the women gain the limited ability to reassert a basic form of control over the borders of their own bodies and are put into the position to negotiate under severe restraints certain conditions and procedures for crossing – in the words of the anonymous author to "reestablish a taboo" and "built a new wall around me" (116). This however happens without recourse to a legal or political apparatus and therefore remains beyond the scope of an emerging new sovereignty.

The second strategy of resistance that surfaces in the Anonyma's report consists of a collective engagement of the traumatic events. The diary describes women who do not

struggle as isolated individuals, but who take part in what the anonymous author terms “a collective experience” (161). She explains that “the present form of collective rape will also be overcome collectively” (161). The collective nature of the women’s ordeals enables a shared negotiation of the atrocious assaults and leads to a communal engagement with the traumatic experiences. As a result, it becomes easier to tackle the gross violations and to adopt counterstrategies such as prostitution that are collectively sanctioned as legitimate means of survival. This collective normalization is reflected in the matter-of-factly way in which women treat the fact of massive and repeated abuse.

The scene described by the Anonyma when she, after weeks of isolation, meets a former colleague whom she had believed to be dead attests to this particular logic. When the women meet they ask each other “the stereotypical question” (236): “‘How often defiled, Ilse?’ ‘Four times, and you?’ ‘No idea. Had to work my way up from grunt to major’” (220). Later the two women continue their conversation mocking their tormentors: “they [Russians] may know the latest advancements of socialist planning, but as long as the side of erotic is concerned they remained at the level of Adam and Eve” (220). At a different occasion the diary quotes the joking remark of an older woman that “a Russian on the belly is better than an American on the head” (236) implying that she prefers to be raped than to die in the massive carpet-bombing of urban centres as it had been implemented by the Royal and US air force. According to Dahlke (1999) the diary’s “unspectacular presentation [of rape] as an everyday experience, as one form of suffering among many others” (92) “challenged established moral conventions” (93) and constituted one reason for the at times significant skepticism the account was met with by contemporary critics.⁹

During the writing of her diary, the anonymous author develops a consciousness of her own role as “witness” (88) and critically contemplates the fact that the present situation entails a fundamental reconceptualization of key moral terms: “I still haven’t answered the question whether I have to call myself a prostitute since I in fact make a living of my body. [...] I have to rethink why I deem the profession of a prostitute to be below my dignity. [...] What does it really mean, bad?” (129). Most importantly, however, in openly talking about their experiences the women described in the diary gain a language to address their suffering and this way process it: “one also linguistically anticipates the advancing degradation” (41). As a consequence of this several neologisms enter the language of the diary “majorsugar, defilmentsshoes, pillagewine and pinchcoals” (206) and the issue of rape and abuse is increasingly countered with a peculiar form of sarcasm. The Anonyma explains that the community “begins to treat the whole defilement-business with a dash of humour – gallows humour” (134) and “employs mockery to take revenge on those who humiliated them” (221). The diary provides access to “offensive coping strategies” that employ “humour as double-edged mechanism of defence” (Dahlke 2000b, 203).¹⁰

⁹ My translation. German original “relativ unspektakulär als alltägliche Erfahrung, die [...] nur ein Leid unter Vielen darstellt” (92) and “attackiert eine [...] kleinbürgerliche Moral” (93).

¹⁰ My translation. German original “offensiver Bewältigungsversuch [...] Humor als doppelter Abwehrmechanismus”.

Parallel to a description of the various ways through which massive rape and abuse are challenged, negotiated, and processed, the Anonyma also chronicles the slow ascendance of a new sovereign order that slowly starts to replace the state of the exception. The Anonyma discovers a first sign in German and Russian language that prohibits Russians to enter German flats (124) and she laconically remarks that the times for “wild and unchecked defilement” (127) are over for now - “a form of order again becomes palpable” (141). In spite of the Anonyma’s assertion that “besides many other defeats the end of this war also means the defeat of the male sex” (51), this slow reemergence of a sovereign order is accompanied by the re-ascendance of German men into positions of power and influence. This development increasingly forces women to remain silent about their experiences and suppress their traumatic memories. Accordingly, the Anonyma asserts that “from now on we women will have to keep our mouths shut and pretend that precisely we had been spared. Otherwise no man will want to come close to us anymore” (163). A statement that is confirmed by the hostile reaction of the Anonyma’s boy-friend who perceived the diary as shameless and treacherous. She quotes him as follows: “You have all become shameless like dogs in this block. Can’t you see that?” (274). The emerging new order appears inherently gendered and disallows for a continued open and collective treatment of the events and abuses. It can be argued that the observed self-decreed collective silence foreshadowed the hostile reception of the Anonyma’s confessions upon the first German publication in 1959.

The diary of the Anonyma provides access to a distinctly female experience of war. It presents women who actively and collectively engage the severe limits defined by the historical situation. Therefore it leads beyond stereotypical presentations of war that tend to focus on the heroic endeavors of soldiers and situate women as helpless victims and objects for male protection. In describing the strategies and practices through which females successfully transform a situation of complete lawlessness into a small scale economy based on the exchange of food and protection for sexual and other services, the Anonyma’s diary places women civilians and the specific grievances, challenges, performances, and, indeed sacrifices, of this group in the front seat of a war narrative. In doing so, her report also challenges a hegemonic masculine discourse of war that reduces mass rape to an assault on the nation’s male protectors and that narrowly frames successful female strategies of survival as morally weak, shameful, and inherently treacherous. The Anonyma voices a powerful challenge to this war discourse. Maybe, precisely here one of the reasons for the long-lasting silence surrounding her story can be found.

Challenging Borders of Discourse: Contexts of Reception

In German public and historical discourse three important milestones regarding the issue of mass rape in general and the diary of the Anonyma in particular can be discerned; one is connected to the mid 1950s, one to the mid 1990s, and one to the first decade of the new millennium. In the 1950s the German Ministry for the Displaced and Refugees conducted a large-scale documentation of the atrocities committed against German

civilians at the end of the Second World War (Diestelkamp et.al. 1954). This documentation also included a huge number of reports that testified to mass rape of women and girls. Public attention, however, remained low. The subject was passed in silence by a society about to regain economic strength and confidence in the West, and ordered to everlasting friendship with the Soviet Union in the East. This fact led Kaes (1989, 10) to label this period of German post-war history as “the flight from memory”.

In the 1990s, however, two developments enabled a cautious increase in public attention. Firstly, the breakdown of the Eastern block enabled attention to abuses committed by members of the Soviet forces and allowed for limited access to Russian archives and eyewitnesses accounts of Red Army veterans. In addition, the slow dying of age of World War II eyewitnesses further facilitated a “paradigm shift” (Beck-Heppner 2010, 139) in the German historical profession that since the 1970s had increasingly changed focus from traditional top-down approaches to an oral history articulated from below. This change also included a renewed interest in the diaries, witness accounts, and other testimonies given by women and girls who had lived through the horrors of 1944/45.

Helke Sanders’s documentary movie *BeFreier und Befreite* (1992; *Liberators Take Liberties*)¹¹ benefitted from both these developments. When it was screened on German public broadcasting in 1992, the traumatic experience of mass rape was for the first time brought to the awareness of a mass audience. The film consists of interviews with survivors and eyewitnesses and presents the issue in an unadorned manner. Accordingly, it inspired an at times vicious debate. Reviews ranged from Ulrich Wickert’s announcement in the news programme *Tagesthemen* that to see this film “is a duty” (quoted in Jahr/Sanders 2005, 3) to the predictable accusation Sanders would victimize German women and use the issue of mass rape to relativize the German crimes committed throughout the Second World War (Koch 1992, Grossmann 1997).¹² In sum, however, Sanders’s film articulated previously silenced and marginalized memories that during the coming decades would develop their own dynamics.

In the new millennium, the growing interest in an oral history of the last days of the Second World War reached the domain of popular culture where various real or fictitious documents were transformed into mainstream cultural products suited for consumption by a mass audience. In this period several diaries or other autobiographical accounts by women who had lived through the ordeals of 1944/45 were published or republished (Boveri 2004 [1968], Meinhof 2005, Hesse-Werner 2006, Jacobs 2008, Köpp 2010). Bevor’s (2002) detailed account of the downfall of Berlin gained

¹¹ In response to the debate concerning the second edition of the Anonyma’s diary Helke Sanders published the film’s manuscript and additional material together with Barbara Jahr in 2005 (Jahr/Sanders 2005).

¹² See for instance the charges Grossmann (1997) launches against Jahr/Sanders’s approach. Her attacks reach their climax in the assertion that Jahr/Sanders “construct a new national community of suffering that served not only to avoid confrontation with Nazi crimes, but also, of course, as a strategy for reauthorizing and reestablishing the unity of the *Volk*, providing the basis for a ‘sick’ Germany to recover once again” (Grossmann 1997, 51; emphasis in original).

significant popularity and was followed by a filmic reenactment of the last days of Adolf Hitler in *Der Untergang* (Hirschbiegel 2004). Even though Hirschbiegel's film almost entirely evades the issue of rape, the fact that Hitler is portrayed through the eyes of his young secretary Traudl Jung attests to the popularity of a bottom-up perspective.

The three phases outlined above are also reflected in the reception of the Anonyma's report. When the diary was first published in an English edition in 1954 it was received "with sympathy" (Ceram 1959, 7)¹³ by the British and American press. The first publication in German by a small publishing house based in Switzerland in 1959, on the other hand, "was met with hostility and silence" in post-war Germany (Enzensberger 2005, 310). Contemporary critics attacked the confession of the Anonyma as inauthentic, revisionist, and above all "besmirching the honor of the German women" (Raphael 2006, 695).¹⁴ The harsh reactions that according to Münch (2009) included "massive verbal abuse" (74)¹⁵ were a shock to the anonymous author who decided that no further publication should be allowed until after her death, and illustrated well the "flight from memory" (Kaes 1989, 10) pertaining to the Nazi past, and the veil of silence and neglect that covered the issue of mass rape in post-war Germany. Enzensberger (2005) sums up the reception like this: "everything she [the anonymous author] wrote flew in the face of the reigning post-war complacency and amnesia. No wonder then that the book was quickly relegated to obscurity" (310). This initial hostile reception probably constitutes the reason for the Anonyma to decline an interview with Helke Sanders when she worked on her film in the early 1990s (Johr/Sanders 2005, 5).

In 2003 Hans Magnus Enzensberger edited a second German edition that was published at *Eichborn Verlag*. This second publication in Germany was released into a far more welcoming discursive environment. The general reception was almost enthusiastic and the book topped German bestseller lists for weeks. It was acknowledged as a unique witness account and an important contribution to historical discourse pertaining to the last days of World War II. Translation into several European languages followed in quick succession. Even though the new edition was generally received well by the public and no allegations regarding possible immoral or inappropriate behavior by the women were made, also this time some criticism was launched.

Regarding the 2003 edition, questions pertaining to the authenticity of the Anonyma's report and to possible editorial additions, changes, or omissions played a central role. Bisky (2003) for instance shows that there are inconsistencies between the two German editions that lead for instance to the exclusion of vital information regarding the write-up process in July 1945 from Enzensberger's republication in 2003.¹⁶ As Ullrich (2003)

¹³ "verständnisvolle Aufnahme"

¹⁴ The author quotes reviews referred to by Hans Magnus Enzensberger (2005).

¹⁵ "massive Beschimpfungen". The author does unfortunately not provide any concrete examples and does not refer to any specific publication.

¹⁶ The paragraph containing the important note by the Anonyma "I neatly transcribe my notebooks [...] accurately and without abbreviations" (Anonyma 1959, 295) has been deleted from Hans Magnus Enzensberger's 2003 edition. This omission has been carried over into the diary's latest translations into for instance English and Norwegian (Anonyma 2005a/b). Bisky (2003) remarks that the fact of a rewriting

points out, the refusal from the sides of Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Hannelore Marek (who now holds the rights to the Anonyma's diary) to make the original manuscript available to the public not exactly serves to reduce doubts concerning the authenticity of the book editions. Even when disconnected from issues pertaining to moral significance and ideological frames, the question of the documentary value of the Anonyma's report remains an issue of debate.

The controversy concerning the authenticity of the diary extended into a debate about the fictionalization and dramatization of a profoundly traumatic historical event that followed the release of the feature film by Max Färberböck in 2008. The screen adaptation had a mixed reception. On the one hand, the director was commended for his balanced and non-voyeuristic presentation of an almost impossible issue. On the other, however, precisely this balancing and the general reluctance to directly image unimaginable sufferings generated some criticism.¹⁷ Some treated the film as a courageous and honest attempt to throw light upon an issue that was “a taboo in the East and not an issue in the West” (Meinhof 2008, 13) – a “streak of genius” that brings a silenced dimension of German history on stage (Kreye 2008). Kreye however also voices an apparently inevitable criticism against Färberböck's attempt to do justice to all sides. In the end, he argues, the screen adaptation reduces a powerful historical document to a “primetime drama that is compatible with a mass audience” (2008). Münch (2009, 22-23) argues in a similar direction when he criticizes Färberböck for the overtly melodramatic plot structure that for instance invents a dawning love relationship between the Anonyma and a Russian major and inserts the figure of a jealous female Red Army paramedic.

The controversies the diary and its adaptations triggered attest to the fact that the Anonyma's report had an impact on political and historical discourse in Germany. Publications in several editions, translations, screen adaptation, the production of educational material for the use of the film in school, extensive public debate, and repeated reviews and comments function as *pluri-medial constellations* (Erl 2010) that ensure a wide and continued availability of her account across the borders of genre and media and this way constantly actualize the memory-creating potentials of the original document.

Perceived in this light, it can be argued that the diary and its adaptation and commentaries, indeed constitute “interventions in cultural and political life” (Kaes (1989, x) that impact historical discourse and memory politics. As such, I agree with Halley (2011) who sees questions pertaining to possible adaptations, additions or omissions as “the core of a false dilemma” (201). Instead of attempting to trace literal

process in 1945 is not astonishing in itself but becomes so when reference to it is omitted by an editor without sufficient comment or debate.

¹⁷ For a distinction between two styles for the presentation of the suffering other – a mimetic and an aesthetic style – see Pötzsch (2012b). While a mimetic style sets out to accurately image the surface appearances of past pains, an aesthetic style provides a frame for contingent reimagination that enables a variety of different and often competing articulations to surface.

truths, focus can be directed toward the rhetoric of the diary, the discursive environments within which these operate, and the possible political impacts of the conveyed “metaphorical truths” (Rosenstone 2006, 8) in a *postliterate age*.

Rearticulating Silenced Pains of the Past: A Conclusion

In contrast to many other eyewitness accounts and diaries the work by an anonymous woman in Berlin became a major success and managed to cross the border between historical document and mainstream culture. What qualities made the diary of the Anonyma stand out among comparable accounts and ensured its continued availability?

One important aspect are the alleged literary qualities of the written work. Beevor (2005) for instance commends the diary’s “literary merit” (5) and striking imagery that had provided the basis for some earlier suspicion regarding the real authorship. Indeed, the style is characterized by precision in observation and by distanced, reflected comments. These qualities, however, come to no surprise. The author knew several European languages including Russian. She worked as a journalist before and during the war and had been travelling Europe for an extended period of time. As such, the suspicion that such a well formulated and precise account probably couldn’t have been written in its present form by a woman who had been subjected to mass rape by Soviet soldiers seems to say more about the critics than the work or its author. It is also beyond doubt that precisely the rhetoric qualities of the work attracted such important publishers as Kurt Marek and Hans Magnus Enzensberger. The activities of the latter provided a second important reason for the late, but significant impact of the Anonyma’s story.

A third factor might possibly be found in the author herself. It can be argued that the reflected and distanced contemplations of a grown-up, urban, cosmopolitan, upper-middle class woman resonate better with a contemporary readership than, let’s say, the awkward formulations and blunt allegations of a girl from the provincial country-side. From this point of view, the Anonyma’s confessions force us to acknowledge the necessity of differentiating the women who experienced the collective fate of mass rape along such axis as class, region, age, or education rather than meshing together their various disparate identities under the master signifier inherently self-empowered and unbendable victim of rape.

Rape, as much can be said, factors differently in different contexts and the fact that it is carried out on a massive scale does not absolve us from the obligation to treat each and every case in its specific context. An act that might destroy a young girl in a region characterized by for instance a conservative view on gender roles, can be voiced and therefore processed in a group of self-confident, experienced, adult women. As such, the report of the Anonyma presents the reader with a ‘hero’ – a strong and reflected character who can step outside the severe restraints and hardships of her present situation and actively reassert a limited form of control over her own body. This position of reflected detachment and agency realized in a form of “minimal politics” (Marchart 2010) constitutes the core of what makes the diary so ‘attractive’, but at the same time directs attention away from all those women and girls who could not go on, who did not manage to empower themselves, who were not part of an enlightened fellowship of

women confronting and even ridiculing their unsophisticated tormentors and incapable protectors alike. These other stories are far less ‘pleasurable’ to read and therefore far less publishable or transferrable to screen to ‘please’ a mass audience. They are nevertheless out there and deserve greater public and scholarly attention – be it in the context of the Second World War, Bosnia, Rwanda, or any other place where war or a breakdown of order unleash sexual violence on a mass scale.

As every story and historical discourse has its inherent blind spot, also the limitations of the Anonyma’s report need to be taken into account. Not to undermine her position or reduce the significance of her brave testimony, but to include even more subaltern voices into the public conversation about our shared past.

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Summary

Situating itself in the field of cultural memory studies, this article traces the slow emergence in German historical discourse of the narrative of an anonymous German woman who survived the Soviet occupation of Berlin in 1945. I will, firstly, conceptualize the historical condition of the Anonyma as a precarious liminal sphere of transition between competing sovereignties that dislodged her political status as citizen and reconstituted her as bare life in the sense of Agamben. Secondly, I direct focus to the relationship between the personal story of the Anonyma and a historical Master narrative pertaining to the period.

The article argues for a close connection between the woman's form of resistance that aimed at replacing unchecked rape with a form of coerced prostitution to reassert limited control over the borders of her body, and the negative reception her diary received after a first publication in Germany in 1959. Her story implicitly challenges a hegemonic discourse of war that treats mass rape as mainly an assault on the nation's male defenders and that silences the victims' traumatic experiences with reference to collective guilt and individual shame or treason.

Keywords

Frau in Berlin, Berlin 1945, World War II, film, diary, cultural memory, bare life, war, rape, Giorgio Agamben, history, trauma, resistance