

War and Rape. Analytical Approaches¹

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With the establishment of camps in the middle of Europe, for the single purpose of committing rape and sexual torture, violence against women has reached a new stage. In the following I shall attempt to open up an analytical perspective on these events. First, the question of the purpose of rape in general will be posed. Second, five explanations of the function of rape in war will be developed. Finally, some light will be thrown on the logic of silence that is characteristic of war crimes against women to this day.

1. The Function of Rape

When trying to find out the reasons for rape, one comes upon a host of myths and ideologies. The most popular and probably most effective myth is that rape has something to do with an irrepressible male sexual drive which, if not restrained, will regrettably but inevitably have its way. In actual fact there are good reasons to assume that rape neither has very much to do with nature nor with sexuality. Rather, it is an extreme act of violence perpetrated by sexual means. This is illustrated by numerous studies on rape conducted mainly in the United States, but recently also in German-speaking countries (e.g. Heinrichs, 1986; Feldmann, 1992). These studies show that rape is not primarily a sexually motivated act, but an act of aggression. In other words: Rape is not an aggressive expression of sexuality, but a sexual expression of aggression. In the perpetrator's psyche, it does not fulfill sexual functions, but is a manifestation of anger, violence and domination of a woman. The purpose is to degrade, humiliate and subjugate her. (cf. Groth/Hobson 1986:88)

Forcible entry into the body is the severest attack imaginable on the most intimate self and the dignity of a person. In general, it is a characteristic of severe torture. Entering a woman's body by force has effects that are comparable to torture: It causes physical pain, the loss of personal dignity and self-determination, and it is an attack on the woman's identity. Any struggle for dignity and self-determination is rooted in the control of one's own body, primarily the control of physical access to one's body (cf. Dworkin 1990:243)

Research on rape in civilian contexts shows that the amount of violence exerted in the form of beating, strangling and other maltreatment often grossly exceeds the violence necessary for carrying out the rape. In most cases a rape victim does not feel she is exposed to sexual act but

an extreme and humiliating form of violence directed against herself and her body. Even rapists themselves hardly ever speak of a sexual experience. Instead, they express feelings of hostility, aggression, power and dominance. (cf. Feldmann, *ibid.*:7)

The analysis of gang rapes revealed additional motives. Here, the main purpose seems to be to prove one's masculinity to the other members of the group. Gang rapes often follow a ritualized pattern, i.e. the sequence in which the rape is carried out is determined by each man's status in the group. Rapists also tend to depersonalize their victims. They hardly perceive the woman as an individual and, if they did not know her before, are often unable to describe her afterwards. For the rapist, the victim is "women as such" and not a concrete person. This explains why rapists hardly ever have pity on their victims or feel guilty towards them. In sum, we can say: In the act of rape the perpetrator's sexuality is not an end in itself. Rather, it is used as an instrument in exerting violence. (cf. Feldmann *ibid.*; Groth/Hobson *ibid.*)

Another argument against a biologicistic approach can be derived from ethnological research. With regard to the place that rape has in a society, one can distinguish rape-free and rape-prone societies. Largely rape-free are those societies in which a) male supremacy is completely unchallenged - example: most Islamic societies; or b) societies in which women are appreciated and enjoy a respected status in their culture. Rape-prone, on the other hand, are societies in which a) male power has been destabilized, b) women have a subordinate status and are held in low esteem, and c) rigid definitions of "masculine" and "feminine" prevail and determine the relative positions of power and the hierarchy of values. Nearly all modern Western societies count among the rape-prone societies. A good example is the United States with its traditionally strong women's movement and correspondingly unstable male power. Rape is at present the most frequent crime of violence in the United States. (Porter 1986; Reeves 1986)

It is thus evident that rape is by no means rooted in human nature or human sexuality. Rather, it is an act that is highly dependent on the social and cultural context. If this is so, then what is the social function of rape? There is every indication that rape is used to regulate the power relations between the two genders: It serves to maintain a certain cultural order between the genders or to restore it if it begins to crumble. In rape-prone cultures the mere danger of rape and the frequency of sexual violence contribute to the formation of female (and male) identity. The awareness of the potential danger of being raped has an influence on women's everyday behavior, as we all know. The terror of rape has a symbolic and cultural meaning, even where it is not an immediate problem. The mass rapes committed in World War II and in former Yugoslavia reverberate through the decades and across the borders

and have a lasting effect on the position, the identity and sense of self of women.

II The Function of Rape During and After Wars

Before we look at the meaning of rape in wars, let me make the following points: First, rape does not have functions that are similar at all times and in all societies. These functions depend on the respective historical and cultural context and must ultimately be discussed for each case separately. Second, my attempts at explaining rape in war will not focus primarily on psychological aspects. Instead, the point is to detect cultural patterns that develop more or less "behind the backs" of individuals and which they remain unaware of. Finally, this is by no means an exhaustive treatment of the subject, but merely an attempt to single out certain aspects of rape in war and to make them amenable to analysis.

Thesis 1: Rape is part of the "rules of war". It is a right mainly conceded to the victors.

It seems that rape has always occurred in the wars of known history - i.e. even in societies which, according to the above definition, wars were probably "rape free" (cf. Sander/John 1992). As far as historical sources have been analyzed, this applies to the era preceding the beginning of the early modern age which is presumed to have been less rape-prone than our age and of which one can say with some certainty that the gender boundaries - i.e. the definition of what is "masculine" and what is "feminine" - were more fluid and less rigidly enforced so that "crossing the border" was easier then than it is today. Especially in times of crisis "the boundary line between the genders was temporarily removed or less sharply drawn" (Dekker/Van de Pol 1990: 47; see also Porter 1986; Seifert 1992).

And yet, this did not prevent the occurrence of rape in times of war. To explain this, a look at the highly ritualized pattern that wars follow might help. War is a ritualized "game" - strange as this word may seem in this deadly context - with its own firmly established rules and regulations. (One reason among others why Western military leaders are hesitant to intervene in Bosnia is that they are facing an opponent who is not "playing by the rules" - the rules being that there are structured armies, a clearly identifiable enemy, discernible front lines, a distinct command structure²). Looking back in history, there is evidence that it was or still is one of the rules of the game governing this ritual that the right to exert violence against women is primarily granted to the victor during campaigns of conquest or in the immediate post-war period. There is no indication that there have ever been negotiations conducted with the aim of curbing these atrocities against women. Nor has it ever made

any difference whether there were other females at the soldiers' disposal, for example in brothels. One member of the supreme US military court in Washington stated that the availability of women or prostitutes had no influence on the commitment of rape in war zones (cf. Brownmiller 1978:80). In the "cultural void" of war some men simply prefer rape: What they are after is not sexuality but the exertion of sexual violence against women.

Thesis 2: In military conflicts the abuse of woman is part of male communication.

Rape committed in war can be regarded as the ultimate symbolic humiliation of the male enemy. Experience has shown that the myth of the male protector that is revived in almost every war is really nothing but a myth. It is by no means a cultural imperative to protect women from wars and their consequences. That is not to say that this myth has no social effect and is not a psychological reality for many men (and women). There is no denying either that there have been instances when men protected women (just as there have been instances when women protected men). In principle, however, women are always exposed to the consequences of war. But in addition, the rape of women carries a message: a man-to-man communication, as it were, telling the other side that they are incapable of protecting "their" women and thus hurting their manly pride. This communicative function becomes obvious in the war in former Yugoslavia where busloads of women, six, seven or more months pregnant, are sent back across enemy lines - the vehicles often painted with cynical comments about the babies to be born. The same effect comes to light in the research done by Sander and Johr. They report that in many cases the husbands of women who had been the victims of wartime rape in the spring of 1945, laid the blame for it on their wives themselves or even ended the marriage because of it. This was one of the reasons why many women remained silent about what had been done to them (Sander/Johr 1992). To sum up, we can say that men see the abuse of "their" women as a degradation of their masculinity. What counts is not the suffering of the women, but the effect it has on men (see also Brownmiller 1978).

Thesis 3: Rape is also a result of the construction of masculinity that armies offer their soldiers, and of the idolization of masculinity that is a concomitant of war in Western cultures.

One of the reasons why men feel attracted to the military profession is that it involves a confirmation and strengthening of masculinity (cf. Seifert 1991). For a long time military service fulfilled a symbolic function as a "rite of passage" for young men by which they ultimately acquired their male identity, a "graduation from adolescence to manhood" (Haltiner 1985:37).

Conceptions of masculinity are important both for armies and for the relations between the army and society at large. The military profession is associated with conceptions of masculinity in a way that varies from nation to nation. This includes connotations of power, dominance, eroticism and sexuality. The attractiveness, status and social prestige of the profession also depend on these constructions. How important the construction of masculinity is in the military, is indicated by the fact that with the consolidation of the position of women in the US armed forces the image of the soldier, or rather his professional identity, is beginning to falter and is now in a process of redefinition (cf. Enloe 1992; *Time Magazine* Nov. 30, 1992).

If we look at the images of masculinity that are still valid in Western societies, we see that what is defined as "masculine" is almost inseparably interlinked with heterosexuality and the monopoly of violence: In our culture, a homosexual man is considered less masculine than a heterosexual man; a meek, anxious man is less masculine than an aggressive one. Armies make offers of masculinity at both levels: By excluding women, they connect the monopoly of violence with masculinity; homosexuality is a taboo in all modern armies;³ bawdy jokes about sexuality and women are commonplace in many units. All this is associated with feelings of male superiority. (Enloe 1989; Seifert 1991).

Moreover, Western culture is characterized by an intermingling of violence with eroticism or sexuality. Language reveals it: "Conquests" are made both on the battlefield and in the bedroom; the British press called the German occupation of Belgium at the beginning of the First World War the "rape of Belgium", just as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was dubbed "the rape of Kuwait". In German military usage, the infantryman's rifle is his "Braut" (fiancée or bride). There are countless other examples of figures of speech associating violence and male sexuality (see also Theweleit 1982; Pohl 1992).

Given this ideal of manhood cultivated in the military that ritualizes and combines heterosexual masculinity and violence in a particular way, there is at least a latent (though not determined) potential for rape. This is confirmed by the findings of the American military psychiatrist David H. Marlowe who observed that there is hardly any army where sexual symbolism does not play a role. "Male Bonding", according to Marlowe, is produced by "male sexual metaphor (that) comes to symbolize aspects of the self and of the group in combat." In other words: "This stronger self is built through the metaphor of the soldier's masculinity" (Marlowe 1983:192). At the end of World War II, a military sociologist stated that "in the purely masculine surroundings of the Army, the values associated with the ideal of virility play a determining role in molding the soldier's image of himself and in creating his inner tensions

and the channels for their release" (Elkin 1946:410). This also indicates that the construction of the soldier (or, in other words, the subject positions an army offers) makes a certain kind of behavior more likely than another.

The significance of the amalgamation of violence and masculinity in cultural conceptions is also revealed by the reports on gang rapes committed by American soldiers in Vietnam. It became known that inflicting additional cruelty on the victim had been seen as a kind of virility contest. A few of these crimes were reported by soldiers who had been present, but had not participated in the rapes or sexual tortures. Before the court martial the rapists typically questioned the masculinity of the man who had reported the incident or called him a sissy or a weakling (cf. Brownmiller 1978:105f).

Another explanation for the outbreak of sexual violence during wars is provided by the correlation between male psychology and the social construction of masculinity. For example, the denial and suppression of gentleness, sensitivity and feelings of anxiety, so typical of military organizations, result in a situation where men must constantly prove their masculine identity. "Female" characteristics such as soft heartedness, emotions and empathy are not admitted or are, at least within the organization, depreciated. With this kind of entrenched masculinity it is hardly possible to deal with feelings such as sympathy, lust, anxiety or anger on a rational basis, because they represent a threat to the carefully constructed masculine existence. If in extreme situations these feelings are evoked nevertheless, they cause an anti-female effect. As a result of this, many soldiers resort to the "male" solution that culture provides and in which they have even received expert training - violence, which then turns into specific sexual violence against women (cf. Smith 1992:135f).

Thesis 4: Rapes committed in war are aimed at destroying the adversary's culture.

There is a general belief (notably shared by the military) that it belongs to the regrettable but sometimes inevitable concomitants of armed conflicts that occasionally civilians fall victim to acts of war. Warfare "proper" is considered to be the confrontation that takes place between soldiers. Research on the situation of women in the civil-war areas of Mozambique and Sri Lanka tells a different story (cf. Norstrom 1991). It shows that civilians were to an extreme extent exposed to acts of war. It was civilians rather than soldiers that these wars focused on. And women - who in wartime make up the majority of the civilian population - were tactical targets of particular significance: Because of their cultural position and their important role within the family structure they are a principal target if one intends to destroy a culture. That deconstruction

of culture - and not necessarily the defeat of the enemy army - can be considered one of the primary goals of warfare, because only through its destruction - which involves the destruction of people - can a decision be forced (cf. Scarry 1992). The following figures will illustrate to what extent the civilian population becomes involved in wars. Far more civilians than soldiers were killed in World War I. In World War II, the former Soviet Union lost 9 million soldiers, as compared to 16 million civilians. According to official statements that ratio amounted to 1:5 for the Korean War and 1:13 for the Vietnam War. UNICEF data of 1989 indicate that in the wars fought since World War II 90 percent of all victims have been civilians, with a high percentage of women and children. In an analysis conducted in 1979 the ratio for future wars was assumed to be 1:100.

The theory that within the context of this systematic involvement of civilians rape is part of military tactics was already discussed before the events in Bosnia and Croatia. It was first brought up after the mass rapes committed in Bangladesh in 1971. The number of women raped in Bangladesh was estimated at 200,000. At that time an Indian writer already expressed his conviction that this was a premeditated crime. The rapes had been so systematic and widespread that only deliberate military tactics could have been behind them. He suspected that the purpose was to create a new race and to destroy the Bengali national identity (Brownmiller 1978:89).

Thus, in war zones women are always in a more precarious situation than men. As civilians they are - along with children and old men - the material that war is waged with. This is confirmed by the reports of Bosnian refugees: "Women, children and old people hoisted white flags and stayed in their villages, hoping that as unarmed civilians they had a special status. In some cases that naive hope materialized. In general, however, those who do not carry arms are particularly vulnerable" (Benard/Schlaffer 1992:186).

Thesis 5: Orgies of rape originate in a culturally ingrained hatred of woman that is acted out in extreme situations.

Apart from all the other motives, rape remains an extreme act of male violence against women which would not be possible without feelings of hostility towards women. Ines Sabalic, in her "Report from Zagreb", also pointed to the amount of anger and hatred directed against women without which the specific sexual violence could not be explained. In particular she drew attention to the quasi-ritualized atrocities which were aimed at the femininity of the body - like cutting women's breasts off or slashing their stomachs open after the rape (Sabalic 1992).

The oft-repeated thesis that the purpose of this is first and foremost to

take revenge on the enemy accepts, for one thing, that women are "war material", and is, for another, refuted by reality. The victims of rape in May and June of 1945 were not only Germans, but also Jewish women who had survived the Nazi terror, and women from Eastern Europe whom the Nazis had used for slave labor. In Kuwait, too, the women raped were not exclusively Kuwaitis, but also immigrant workers from the Philippines, Egypt and other countries. Susan Brownmiller draws the conclusion that women are raped in war not only because they belong to the enemy camp, but because they are women and as such are enemies (Brownmiller 1978:69).

The "enemy" concept, however, is problematic in this context. Enemies usually know that they are enemies to each other, and they also have a theory why this is so. Someone who is attacked by an enemy usually fights back. None of this is true for the relationship between the genders. Neither do women normally expect to be attacked on a massive scale, nor do they know why this is done. As women from former Yugoslavia reported, they had felt safe until insanity was unleashed upon them (cf. Benard Schlaffer 1992:190). Starting from the above definition, the conclusion to be drawn is that women are raped not because they are enemies, but because they are the objects of a fundamental hatred borne in the cultural unconscious that comes to the surface in times of crisis.

We must obviously face the fact that in our societies there is a varying degree of hatred of women smoldering beneath a brittle surface.⁴ But these feelings of hatred and contempt manifest themselves already in peacetime. They are, for instance, cultivated in the socially accepted pornography that celebrates physical violence of men against women in peace time and provides a consistent system of hate values (Dworkin). As a result, most men and many women come to regard these hate-filled images as "normal" or neutral or at least not worth mentioning (cf. Dworkin 1990:35). Against this background, war also becomes "an adventure where fantasies of destruction unconsciously directed against women are encouraged and acted out" (Pohl 1992:161).

Soldiers of Nazi Germany also committed rape on a massive scale. It is furthermore known that the Wehrmacht ran brothels where women were forcibly made to work (Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg 1946; testimony of Jan. 31, 1946, Vol. 6:404ff; Vol. 7:456f; see also Hilberg 1961:126ff; Brownmiller 1978:55ff). In the Eastern territories the Wehrmacht used to brand the bodies of captured partisan women - and other women as well - with the words "Whore for Hitler's troops" and to use them accordingly.

III. The Logic of Silence

So far history has placed a cloak of silence over the atrocities committed against women. Sander and Johr, in their research on the mass rapes at the end of World War II, were amazed to find out that in almost five decades these events have never been a subject of discussion. This silence also has a fundamental cultural significance. It denies the historical meaning of rape and its structural importance in gender relations (cf. Porter 1986).

To suppress and to ignore that experience means, within the context of a culture, to blot out female experience and thus female subjectivity. What remains is the female body, for men to have their experience with and to interpret that experience according to criteria that leave their social position of power unquestioned. Those who hold the hegemonic positions of a culture have the power to define. This power over discourse allows them to define experience, to determine limits and values, to assign each thing its place and its qualities, to determine what can and what cannot be expressed, even to control perception itself (cf. Dworkin 1990:26).

That silence also characterizes the current situation in former Yugoslavia. It seems that the Red Cross and other humanitarian relief organizations have for a long time been informed about the existence of rape camps without bringing the scandal to public attention. The United Nations are also said to have long since known about the matter. Ines Sabalic expressed her concern that in the case of Croatia and Bosnia the history of female experience in wartime may repeat itself in that the war crimes committed against women, despite the public attention that the mass rapes have gained in the meantime, will again go unpunished (Sabalic 1992).

International politics also took a long time to react to the reports on the rape camps in Bosnia, even though the New York newspaper *Newsday* ran an article on the camps as early as August 1992. According to the TV station *Eins Plus* a woman from former Yugoslavia had for months unsuccessfully tried to draw the attention of German politicians and other organizations to what was happening, before the German women's TV magazine programme *Mona Lisa* finally took up the subject.

Bringing the violence back to the cultural consciousness and making it public is the sine qua non for change. Only when sexual violence is perceived as a political issue, when it is publicly discussed and analyzed, will it be possible to establish the causes and contexts and to

envisage strategies to overcome this situation.

Mobilizing public empathy may have an additional effect: It may help to provide an opportunity for the victims of sexual violence to express themselves. The rapes committed at the end of World War II are characterized, as Sander and Johr pointed out, not only by their massiveness but by the fact that the victims do not talk about them (cf. *ibid.*:9). This may be due to the lack of a discourse that allowed these women to articulate their experience in a way that preserved their dignity. Not even International Law - a normative institution and thus also one that controls perception - recognized sexual violence as a war crime. So far this crucial female experience has been suppressed and erased from cultural memory or rather, it was attributed to biology or male nature and thus referred to a place at the "natural" but, in the final analysis, historically rather irrelevant margins. From there it must be brought back to the center of historical and political discourses.

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