1. INTRODUCTION

Between 1942 and 1945, the Nazi Schutzstaffel (SS) established 10 brothels, intended for prisoner use only, within select concentration camps. My work explores the Nazis’ reasons for establishing camp brothels and determines whether the brothels succeeded in serving Nazi interests. In my analysis, I investigate the tactics used by the SS to recruit women for the brothels as well as the reactions of male prisoners to the establishment of the brothels.

A portion of my paper focuses on how and why camp brothels have been excluded from Holocaust historiography and the effect this has had on survivors. In my analysis, I investigate how this neglect reflects a larger pattern in which stories of sexualized violence against both men and women, particularly in contexts of war, have been largely excluded from the historical record.

2. METHODOLOGY

My work is based on an analysis of survivor testimony sourced from the University of Southern California’s Shoah Foundation Institute Visual History Archive. Much of my research builds on the work of feminist researchers specializing in the field of sexualized violence during the Holocaust, as well as the work of leading historians studying concentration camp brothels.

3. WHY IS THIS TOPIC RELEVANT?

Research on the camp brothels is very undeveloped. For decades, both academics and the general public placed little value on the experiences of those forced to work in the brothels. As a result, aside from Holocaust records, there is little information concerning the brothels.

Due to widespread stigma regarding sexualized violence and sex work, many survivors felt they could not speak about their experiences in the camp brothels. They were also not given a space in which to do so until decades after the war.

Sexualized violence against women has been regarded as an unfortunate but unavoidable part of war for centuries. Studying the ways in which women experience sexualized violence in contexts of war and genocide can help us recognize situations in which these crimes are likely to occur and thus assist in the prevention of future atrocities.

4. WHY BROTHELS?

Brothels were established in select camps in order to provide an incentive for male prisoners to work harder and reach work quotas during a period when prisoner productivity was extremely low due to meagre food rations and intense physical labour within concentration camps.

SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler believed that providing male prisoners with work incentives in the form of brothel visits would increase productivity among prisoners. Himmler also hoped the brothels would serve as a conversion tool for homosexual prisoners. Himmler encouraged the SS to choose lesbian inmates to serve in the brothels so they would become sexually interested in men. The SS also forced homosexual men to visit the brothels in hopes that they would realize the “pleasures” of heterosexual sex.

5. HOW?

Prisoners were given Prämienschein (bonus vouchers) in exchange for hard work. These vouchers acted as camp money and could be exchanged for cigarettes, extra food rations, or a visit to the brothel, among other privileges.

However, only certain men were permitted access to the brothels. Aryan prisoners were allowed visits, but Jews and Soviet prisoners of war were forbidden.

The brothels were staffed with women from either Auschwitz-Birkenau or the female concentration camp of Ravensbrück. These women were coerced into working the brothels; in addition to the false promise of release from the camp after six months, they were guaranteed a reprieve from intense physical labour, as well as sanitary living conditions and better food, in exchange for working in the brothels. For most women, choosing the brothel over work in the fields or construction commandos meant choosing life over death.

6. WERE THE BROTHELS EFFECTIVE?

Ultimately, no. As the war carried on, food rations diminished, camp conditions became increasingly unsanitary, and violence against inmates increased, causing prisoner productivity to decline even further. Had the SS been logical in its attempts to increase productivity, it would have improved camp working and living conditions for all inmates instead of providing a few prisoners with superficial incentives to work harder.

Additionally, only a select number of privileged prisoners were permitted access to the brothels; not nearly enough to significantly affect camp productivity rates.

Unsurprisingly, Himmler’s attempts to convert homosexual prisoners by use of the brothel system failed. Homosexual survivors have stated that rather than “curing” gay inmates as Himmler had hoped, forced brothel visits reinforced gay men’s homosexuality.

7. REFERENCES


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