

The Gendered Vulnerability of German Women During the Holocaust:

A Case Study of Auschwitz and Ravensbrück Concentration Camps

Introduction

The Holocaust is perhaps one of the most horrific historical events. The genocide of European Jews and other individuals by Nazi Germany and its collaborators represented a paragon of pure evil. Jews, Roma and Sinti people, the disabled, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, asocials, political opponents, and many more people fell victim to the hate and violence of the Nazis. Holocaust scholarship has extensively covered this subject. However, a topic that is often not a focus of Holocaust literature or teaching is gendered experiences. The Holocaust targeted people regardless of gender. However, despite this, men and women experienced the terrors of the Holocaust differently.

It is crucial to discuss individual experiences and avoid generalisations of Holocaust victims' stories. This project will discuss the experiences, responses, and legacy of female Holocaust victims in the hopes of shedding light on the uniqueness of women's experiences and their specific gendered vulnerabilities while in the Nazi concentration camps. My focus will be on the Auschwitz and Ravensbrück camps.

Key Terms

Holocaust: A genocidal event of the twentieth-century. Refers to the state-sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators.

Nazism: A far-right political ideology that was connected to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party.

Third Reich: This is a Nazi term used to refer to a specific time period in history, distinguished by Nazi rule. The German word "Reich" means empire. Whereas the Nazis envisioned a 1000-year empire, the Nazi period lasted from January 30, 1933 to May 8, 1945.

SS: The SS or Schutzstaffel was the paramilitary group of the Nazi party responsible for the concentration camp system.

The Camps

Auschwitz

Auschwitz concentration camp was the largest of the death camps. The camp opened in the spring of 1940 and was liberated by the Soviets in January 1945. During the Second World War, this area of Poland was under German occupation. At first, Auschwitz was a detention centre for political prisoners, though it later evolved into an extermination camp. Most of the gas chambers and crematoria were located at the Birkenau section of the camp that was established in October of 1941. Birkenau had a section for women. Another section of Auschwitz, called Buna or Monowitz, was established in 1942 and housed labourers. Not all prisoners were killed immediately. Those fit for labour worked in the production of war materials for Germany. Deathly "medical" experimentation under Nazi Josef Mengele took place here. Additionally, on October 7, 1944, an uprising took place, killing SS officers and blowing up crematorium IV. It is estimated that over one million Jews were killed at Auschwitz.

Ravensbrück

Ravensbrück concentration camp was primarily a women's camp that operated from May 1939 to April 1945, located in northern Germany near the village of Ravensbrück. Many young children and adolescent girls were also prisoners. It is estimated that over 132,000 women stayed in the camp, and about 20,000 were Jewish. Most women who stayed here were political prisoners. Severe punishment and torture were common. Women were used as slave labour for the German war effort. For example, Siemens Electric Company used prisoners to manufacture their products. In February 1945, a gas chamber was constructed at Ravensbrück. Over 50,000 died and 2,200 were killed in the gas chambers.



Figure 1. Map of the Nazi Concentration Camps.
Martin Gilbert

Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation is often disregarded in Holocaust representations but there is extensive evidence of it in oral testimony. This sexual violence was experienced in many forms:

- Sexual assault and rape upon arrival during body searches for valuables, bartering sex for food or other necessities, and widespread Soviet rape upon liberation are some examples.
- Sexual slavery in brothels established at Auschwitz and other camps occurred. The SS selected many women from Ravensbrück. Living conditions were usually better than in work or death camps. About two hundred women were victims.
- Forced 'medical' experimentation happened in both camps. Many different experiments took place. Invasive gynecologic experiments were unique to women. Additionally, many Roma and Sinti women were sterilised at Ravensbrück.



Figure 2. Women Prisoners at Ravensbrück returning to camp from forced labour.
Yad Vashem

Childbirth and Pregnancy

The ability of female prisoners to bear children was a dangerous vulnerability, as it significantly decreased their chance of survival in the camps.

- Visibly pregnant women were immediately selected for killing, as well as anyone with a child.
- Some women were able to conceal their pregnancy if it was early-stage.
- Compulsory abortions and forced sterilisations occurred at both Auschwitz and Ravensbrück.
- At Auschwitz, 'Dr.' Josef Mengele established a system for easier detection of pregnancies. One method was having SS guards politely ask arriving women at the camps if they were pregnant.
- Jewish prisoner Dr. Gisella Perl at Auschwitz performed many abortions to save women.

Recalling delivery at Auschwitz, Dr. Olga Lengyel said:

The most poignant problem that faced the Jewish doctors in Auschwitz was that of the deliveries... One day we decided that we had been weak long enough. We must at least save the mothers. To carry out our plan, we would have to make the infants pass for stillborn. Even so, many precautions must be taken, for if the Germans were ever to suspect it, we too, would be sent to the gas chambers – and probably the torture chambers first... Unfortunately the fate of the baby always had to be the same. After taking every precaution, we pinched and closed the little tike's nostrils and when it opened its mouth to breathe, we gave it a dose of a lethal product. An injection might have been quicker, but that would have left a trace and we dared not let the Germans suspect the truth.

Menstruation

Experiences of menstruation in the camps brought about shame, dehumanization, and discomfort.

- Lack of privacy in camps made something private very public.
- It was extremely difficult for women to wash themselves or find anything to ease the pain and discomfort of menstruation. This forced many women to free-bleed uncomfortably.
- Sanitary napkins were absent in the camps and even confiscated by Nazi guards upon arrival.
- Bathroom breaks were infrequent, contributing to the discomfort of menstruation of female prisoners.
- Many women lost their menstrual cycle due to malnutrition, extreme physical labour, and physical duress (amenorrhea).

Discussing her experience of menstruation, Auschwitz prisoner Olga Isenberg said:

We came into Auschwitz, the first thing they cut off our hair. They gave us a dress. Here I am menstruating and I'm- and they take away all my napkins. Now, you ask them, 'please give me some.'" To which the Camp guards responded, "'don't worry about [it].'"

Dehumanisation and Humiliation

Experiences of dehumanisation and humiliation were heavily influenced by gender.

- Public nudity and head shaving exploited traditional social roles and expectations of female prisoners.
- Many Orthodox Jewish women would cover their hair once they were married, so head shaving violated this religious norm.
- Some oral testimony refers to the loss of hair contributing to a feeling of a loss of femininity.
- Humiliation, such as public nudity, often had sexual undertones. Prisoners were sometimes forced to strip naked for soldiers and stand in line for hours or parade like this to salacious comments and, sometimes, sexual violence.



Figure 3. Assignment to Slave Labour at Auschwitz.
US Holocaust Memorial Museum



Figure 4. Forced Labour at Ravensbrück.
ADN-Bildarchiv

Materials

The sources used for this project were a mixture of scholarly research and oral testimony. The oral testimony of female Holocaust survivors was obtained from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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Conclusion

Through an analysis of the experiences of women at the Auschwitz and Ravensbrück concentration camps, their gendered vulnerabilities during the Holocaust are made clear. Both male and female victims of the Holocaust faced torture, abuse, starvation, forced labour, humiliation, and death. However, women's experiences were also characterised by pregnancy, childbirth, and menstruation at the camps.

Additionally, they experienced religious humiliation and sexual violence to a different extent than men, especially through head-shaving and public nudity. Additionally, the Holocaust had a significant effect on traditional gender roles and conceptions of gender identity and the self. Overall, women experienced the Holocaust in a gendered way. By focusing on the experiences of female Holocaust victims, individual experiences can be heard and generalisations can be avoided.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge and respect the ɫəkwəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day

This research was supported by the Jamie Cassels Undergraduate Research Award at the University of Victoria.

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor Dr. Helga Thorson of the Germanic and Slavic Studies Department for her immense guidance and support during this project.