

Aug 7 2016

Beyond Victimization: Female Perpetrators of Genocide

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By Miranda Wolford*

Reflecting on major instances of genocide, we often develop archetypes of what the perpetrators of such dehumanizing crimes look like. In the Holocaust, white German men bearing the ominous Swastika characterized the perpetrators. In the Rwandan genocide, barbaric Hutu men wielding machetes defined the enemy. A defining characteristic of each of these perpetrator archetypes is masculinity.

Whether due to lack of evidence or lack of prosecution, there is a surprising paucity of concrete information surrounding women's roles in major acts of genocide. Unsurprisingly, media accounts of these monstrosities [characterize women](#) as the eternal victims and left-behind widows, incapable of taking part in such hateful activities. Yet, [new testimonies](#) from previously unrecorded witnesses coming from a variety of backgrounds has caused modern historians to call into question women's involvement in furthering genocidal acts.

In many of the regions in which genocide and its surrounding political turmoil have been prevalent, there is, or was, a significant gender gap, particularly in the social structure. In the era of the Holocaust, [women of Central and Eastern European backgrounds](#) were typically the upholders of the family and household, naturally subservient to men. Under Hitler, German women were financially rewarded by the government for having higher numbers of children under the [Law for the Encouragement of Marriage](#), yet were discouraged, even blocked, from joining the workforce during the war. Contrary to this value placed on Aryan maternity, in times of the genocide, [Jewish and Roma women became systematically targeted](#) simply because of their fertility.

As a result, [most of the accounts](#) of women in the Holocaust characterize them as the innocent, blameless victims of assault, rape, and murder. While this is unfortunately true for the [majority of Jewish and Roma women during this time](#), this categorization ignores women who elected to be perpetrators of the genocide, wrongfully portraying them too as victims.

The [argument](#) has been made in court that many of the women and men who partook in egregious acts of cruelty during the Holocaust were doing so against their will, merely following orders from their superiors out of fear. From more of a gendered perspective, Nazi women were assumed to be acting on behalf of their husbands, following their lead. However, [evidence](#) has surfaced suggesting that this is only the case for a few select female perpetrators; the majority did so of their [own convictions](#), namely for financial purposes or to pursue their personal ideologies.

One infamous female "villain" of the Holocaust is [Imma Grese](#). One way of understanding her mental disposition and motivations for joining the regime is to analyze the events in [her youth](#) critical to her cognitive development. Her mother committed suicide by drinking hydrochloric acid when Grese was barely a teenager, and she dropped out of high school at the age of fourteen, with her absentee father off supporting the Nazi Party. Stemming from a place of vulnerability, her interest in the [League of German Girls](#), a Nazi youth group, continued to grow until she became so entrapped in the Nazi's ideology, she left home to partake in female SS guard training. She felt a [psychologically-driven need](#) for social belonging amidst societal pressures, which she found in the Nazi regime.

While the [widespread conclusion](#) on what drives a person to join the Nazi regime points to psychopathic tendencies, this was not usually the case. Rather, male and female perpetrators of the Holocaust were merely actors shaped by the murderous agendas and social norms of their time, acting on their own convictions yet nevertheless puppets in the larger scheme. Still, female perpetrators are painted in the media aftermath of the Holocaust as particularly cruel and barbarous.

Grese serves as a paramount example of this trend. In various [witness accounts](#) from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, Grese brutally beat and tortured female prisoners from both a mental and physical standpoint, inflicting pain to the point of dehumanization of her victims, grouping them together and randomly selecting who should be gassed. [Several prisoners](#) broke down and attempted to hide, but she would hunt them down and beat them mercilessly. Going beyond carrying out ordered punishments, she relished the opportunity to crush the hopes of escape held by captive women, using an entourage of [starving dogs](#) to psychologically terrorize the prisoners.

What has made the case of Grese such a fascinating fixture in the media is the stark contrast her actions create with the behaviors of female prisoners at the time. Captive women forged [protective bonds](#) with each other in a response to the rules against maternity mandated by the Reich, initiating a strong sense of survival and familial connection. Despite the fact that

Grese acted the same way a male guard would have in similar situations, a common misconception views her actions as a betrayal to fellow women, not as an act of a Nazi guard in genocide. She is often viewed as a woman void of empathy, not as a Nazi war criminal.

Still, Irma Grese was an exception, but not for the reason one might expect. She is one of many voluntary female perpetrators during the Holocaust, yet she is one of only a [few](#) who was actually tried and executed for her crimes. Male perpetrators, on the other hand, were tried much more frequently.

While women received fewer trials in most regions due to lack of concrete and visual evidence, [their trials](#) had a higher rate of convictions. In the War Crimes Tribunals between 1945 and 1949, only sixty accused women, out of roughly 3,600 female concentration camp workers, were put on trial, with twenty-one of them executed. Conversely, a total of 5,025 men and women were convicted by American, British, and French forces, but only 500 were sentenced to death.

It is not representative of the judicial process taking place to analyze purely the quantitative data surrounding trials for war crimes, though. Using leading expert Andrea Pető's [research on people's tribunals in Hungary](#) as a case study, it is evident the effect of gender roles in carrying out justice. Women on trial who testified, whether truthfully or wrongfully, that they were merely acting on the accord of their husbands or superiors received significantly lesser sentences and oftentimes sympathy from the judge. On the other hand, women who acknowledged their role as political leaders or orchestrators in acts of genocide received disproportionately higher sentences, as the witnesses and judges perceived their actions as going against the status quo of gender norms. Because of the [lack of photographic evidence](#) of female involvement in genocide, female witnesses and victims were oftentimes called upon as the main source of information about the crimes committed, leading to a clear bias in the perspectives presented. From a male perspective, the testimony that a male guard was simply acting upon orders was less effective. Men only received lesser sentences if they had the means to hire a lawyer, but they were still convicted less harshly than the women in the same people's tribunals.

The pursuit of justice for the victims of the Holocaust was unfortunately colored by the widespread stereotypes of who the "villains" were: Nazi men. It is undeniable that men comprised the [majority of perpetrators](#) of the Holocaust genocide, but to deny the role of many women carrying out such cruel crimes as well is to deny the suffering of their victims.

In remembering the trials and tribulations faced by the targeted groups during the Holocaust, we must clear our preconceived notions of who can be a victim and who can be a villain, eliminating bias from the judicial process.

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