# **Miriam Gebhardt.** ***Als die Soldaten kamen. Die Vergewaltigung deutscher Frauen am Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs*****. München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2016.**

By Anja Wieden, Oakland University, Rochester, USA

1 Miriam Gebhardt's work bravely and expertly reorients the discourse concerning rape committed against German women at the end and in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Like many of her predecessors, Gebhardt attempts to uncover why so many women fell prey to the occupational forces. Refreshingly, she does not repeat Helke Sander's and Erich Kuby's oft-cited scholarship on the subject, choosing to innovate upon it instead. For Gebhardt, rape is not simply an unfortunate byproduct of war, caused by hatred and revenge against the enemy Other. Rather, it is a symptom of the early twentieth century's gender insecurities. Traditional gender hierarchies were at stake as the West opened up to alternative lifestyles for men and women, and as the East established a state-decreed gender equality law. Many soldiers were threatened by the collapse of the old order when they entered the war, which, according to Gebhardt, abetted sexual violence in Germany. The author believes that mass rape might be the persecutors' subtle wish for a clear-cut gender hierarchy, in which the supposedly masculinized strong overpower the feminized weak. Gebhardt's unique argument is perfectly in line with the overall progressive tone of her work. In her five chapters, she systematically dispels predominant myths that have thus far pervaded the scholarship, including the misidentification of the Red Army as the main persecutors of rape, as well as the assertion that German men repudiated children who resulted from the abuse.

2 In chapter one, "Siebzig Jahre zu spät", Gebhardt reckons with the delayed general interest in sexual violence against German women after World War II. Women,

unlike soldiers, were classified as second-rate victims who had no public venue for their suffering. Even though interest in the mass rapes of that era has recently gained momentum, historians' critical analyses of eyewitness accounts are complicated by the fact that definitions of what legally constituted sexual violence have changed drastically in the intervening years. Sexual assault without vaginal penetration, for instance, did not usually qualify as a sexual crime in the early postwar period. Despite these moral and legal shifts in understanding, Gebhardt remains optimistic. Determined to reengage with Sander's 1990s estimate of two million rape victims during this period, Gebhardt proposes that the more conservative figure of 860,000 be used for future research. Instead of limiting her scope to Berlin like Sander, Gebhardt bases her estimate on the number of illegitimate children occupying all of Germany during the war's aftermath. Gebhardt claims her count is more accurate than Sander's calculation, which relied in part on dubiously interpreted hospital abortion records. An informed reader familiar with the discourse on rape will appreciate Gebhardt's methods, especially since Sander's numbers have been difficult to substantiate.

3 In chapter two, "Berlin und der Osten – Chronik eines angekündigten Unheils", Gebhardt continues to question established perceptions concerning the past. She specifically criticizes stereotypical representations of Red Army soldiers, who are defined either as unschooled and violent rapists or as well-educated and respectful gentlemen. While Gebhardt is not the first to demand that this exaggerated view of the Red Army be corrected, she also insists that scholars reconsider cliché depictions of female victims. Eyewitness accounts in particular, she argues, should be analyzed with caution as they often reflect outdated gender norms. Women of that time generally presented themselves as resourceful, disciplined resisters of the occupiers' advances, resembling the culturally admired strength and virtues of German soldiers.

4 In chapter three, "Süddeutschland – '"Wer schützt uns vor den Amerikanern?"', Gebhardt stresses that wartime rape was not only a typical phenomenon fueled by flight and expulsion of Eastern Germans or the citizens of bombed-out Berlin – it affected women in the privacy of their homes in Southern Germany as well. These women, typically victimized by American GIs, experienced a radically different sort of sexual oppression than did their Berlin counterparts. Since the GIs, unlike the Red Army, enjoyed a comparatively positive reputation, women struggled to prove what had been done to them. The public suspected women all too quickly of fraternization or even prostitution if they were under even the slightest suspicion of leading an unchaste lifestyle. Unfortunately for these women, the decision makers in their rape cases were usually American authorities. But that is not all: Gebhardt reminds us that incidents of sexual violence happened well into the fifties in Southern Germany. The supposed American-German friendship, spurred by the Cold War, added to women's struggles to successfully protect themselves from rape and to hold their perpetrators accountable.

5 Chapter four, "Schwanger, krank, verfemt – der Umgang mit den Opfern", illuminates the inhumane conditions under which female rape victims fought for child support in the mid-fifties and onwards. The West German authorities reacted unsympathetically to their claims and even accused rape victims of intentional fraternization, because the German State did not want to assume the financial burden and because the postwar culture, obsessed with rebuilding Germany based on a hetero-normative family morale, systematically outcast all women who did not reflect that ideal. In short, indecency became the new public enemy in the form of misfit women. Even though indecency was not technically punishable by law, the measures that were taken to fight the supposed moral decay posed a real threat to many women: female citizens had to undergo

medical examinations for venereal diseases, many homeless girls were brought to reformatories, and some women even fell prey to forced sterilizations. Despite these harsh conditions, rape victims with children kept on fighting for monetary compensation, and many of them found support from their husbands. By taking a closer look at the repeated demands and the women's personal stories, Gebhardt vehemently rejects the preconceived notion that rape was ever silenced in postwar Germany and that women (and men) repudiated the children born out of sexual violence.

6 The final chapter, chapter 5, "Der lange Schatten", demonstrates that the phenomenon of coldheartedness towards female rape victims is not unique to the postwar era. In the twenty-first century, we still find considerable ignorance concerning women's suffering. Infamous scholarly texts, like Erich Kuby's 1968 *The Russians and Berlin,* still shape the discourse on rape today. Kuby falsely depicts German women as stoic bearers of sexual violence, whose emotional efforts solely went into rebuilding both the country and its men. Gebhardt brings into consideration that Kuby's view, adopted by many scholars as fact, merely recycles the feminine ideal of the 1950s and 1960s. Hence, the true interest of his text is not women's stories, but the story of the masculine postwar resurrection. Male expectations of women have, and still do, dominate the discourse. Gebhardt concludes her work with another example of needy masculine dominance, namely, the perception of the 2003 republication of *A Woman in Berlin*. Its anonymous author has been harshly criticized for her confident and detailed depictions of rape, provoking many critics to doubt her account's authenticity. With her unconventionally written text, the author has broken the patriarchal rules of how to remember rape as a female victim. Her narration triggered critics' masculine pride, which lead, according to Gebhardt, to the violent act of exposing her identity.

7 *Als die Soldaten kamen* does not hide behind repeated arguments of well-established leaders of the discourse on wartime rape. Gebhardt reckons with false perceptions and even gives guidance for future analyses of eyewitness reports that are sensible towards the differences between today's and early postwar culture. Her clear prose, attention to detail, and thought-provoking arguments are certainly suited for graduate students who would like to educate themselves on the existing scholarship. At their stage of academic education, they would certainly benefit from considering Gebhardt's unique perspective as a way to think about the possible root causes of sexual violence during war. Established scholars of the occupation period will appreciate Gebhardt's courage and confidence to break with past research patterns that favored a patriarchal view on women as victims.