

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04381-7 — The Soviet Occupation of Germany: Hunger, Mass Violence and the Struggle  
for Peace, 1945–1947

Filip Slaveski

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

---

*Part I*

The explosion of violence

## 1 The Soviet advance into Germany

---

The commander of the Yanovskii camp, *Oberführer* Vilgas, habitually fired his rifle from the balcony of the camp office at the prisoners working on the camp grounds . . . His wife did the same. Now and then, Vilgas ordered his guards to throw camp infants into the air and shot them to the ground to the applause of his nine year old daughter who cried, ‘Daddy, again, again!’<sup>1</sup>

Red Army soldiers arrived at the Yanovskii camp in Ukraine in the middle of the hot summer of 1944. The fleeing Germans had left them fresh corpses in shallow, sandy graves behind the camp. It wasn’t difficult for the soldiers to find them. The stench was sickening, attracting the fat summer flies that feast on rotting skin. They tore at the nerves of the soldiers no end. But at least they didn’t have to dig for long. The corpses were hardly buried, only flung upon one another in narrow ditches and covered with loose sand. The dead had their hands tied behind their back and a bullet hole in the front and back of their skulls. The women’s hair had been ripped out by the German guards as they dragged them to the edge of the ditch. Hair was scattered everywhere in sandy clumps both within and above the graves. Army photographers shifted the women’s corpses into poses that would allow them to snap the raw patches on their scalps in the best light.

The prisoners at Yanovskii and other camps sought out anything on which to scribble their semi-literate testimonies to these crimes. They abound in the Russian archives, presenting us with a mosaic of discoloured papers, newspaper sheets, and cheap cardboards bearing witness to what Germany’s war of annihilation in the Soviet Union meant to its victims. These records help us to understand the conduct of Soviet soldiers towards German civilians once the tables were turned, that is, when the Red Army swept through Eastern Europe and invaded Germany in January 1945.

<sup>1</sup> State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) – f. (*fond*) r-7021, op. (*opis'*) 128, d. (*delo*) 157, l. (*list*) 6.

## 4 The explosion of violence

The soldiers who liberated the camps had seen mass graves and extermination camps across Europe, their indignation and feeling of injustice rising with every step westward. Now it had reached a climax, face to face with their emaciated countrymen. Girls as young as sixteen who had been kidnapped from their homeland by German forces cried in their arms confessing the sordid details of their defiled youth.<sup>2</sup> If the emaciated and disease-ridden camp survivors couldn't muster the breath to ask their liberators to avenge them, the sight of corpses rotting in shallow graves screamed for it.

Most soldiers, however, never set foot in the camps. The clarity of this sight and pitch of this scream was thus set by journalists who published endless news stories about the camps in army newspapers. These stories were replete with photographs of emaciated prisoners and piles of corpses which managed to shock even the most battle-hardened, literate and not.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, for many of them, the camps were not the essence of German criminality that they would later become in contemporary understandings of the war and certainly not the source of their wrath in 1945. This source was inexorably personal, impassioned, but underlain by the logic of this war that called for it to be waged without restraint.

As the Red Army advanced through the western parts of the Soviet Union it found them totally devastated by German forces. In large swathes of 'partisan-infected areas' in Belorussia and Ukraine as Hitler called them,<sup>4</sup> German forces waged a war behind the front line, killing partisan suspects, mostly civilians, en masse. Particularly telling was the practice of torturing wives of suspect partisans for information in open squares to 'root out' their husbands hiding in the woods, supposedly watching on.<sup>5</sup> Other suspects were shot, hung, or if they were luckier, deported to Germany as slave labour along with the other 'able-bodied' people. The areas were stripped not only of manpower, but of foodstuffs, animals, clothing, and their housing and infrastructure destroyed.<sup>6</sup> By 1943 German forces were thus no longer pacifying these areas to administer them better, but

<sup>2</sup> Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) – f. 17, op. 125, d. 318, ll. 23–5.

<sup>3</sup> A. Kondoyanidi, 'The Liberating Experience: War Correspondents, Red Army Soldiers, and the Nazi Extermination Camps', *The Russian Review* 69 (2010).

<sup>4</sup> M. Edele and M. Geyer, 'States of Exception: The Nazi-Soviet War as a System of Violence, 1939–1945', in *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, ed. M. Geyer and S. Fitzpatrick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 381.

<sup>5</sup> GARF – f. r-7021, op. 128, d. 104, l. 43.

<sup>6</sup> B. Shepherd, 'Hawks, Doves and Tote Zonen: A Wehrmacht Security Division in Central Russia, 1943', *Journal of Contemporary History* 37, no. 3 (2002): 353. For the number of people evacuated to Germany see Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941–1944. Ausstellungskatalog*

destroying them to make them uninhabitable for the advancing Red Army. As some historians have recently noted, the German ‘term for this *Verwüstung* (desertification) is telling and entirely appropriate’.<sup>7</sup>

The logic of the war that eventually led to these human deserts, or *Tote Zonen* (dead zones) as the Germans called them, was that it was to be fought without restraint against men, women, and children ‘with every means . . . in which the winner took all’.<sup>8</sup> Even before the Red Steamroller rolled into Germany in January 1945, it was clear who the winner would be. Millions of terrified German civilians cognizant of this logic or at least of the sense that one reaps what one sows fled westward to escape the Red Army in January 1945. Years of Nazi propaganda featuring the terrifying ‘Russian beast’ accelerated their progress. It was left largely to those who could not flee in time to answer for the crimes of a nation – German women and children, the elderly, and the infirm. Some had no idea that the Red Army was near. Their local Nazi chiefs had prohibited them from evacuating their towns while fleeing secretly themselves, leaving them to find out the hard way that they had been abandoned.

The question now was whether the Red Army would allow the Germans who remained to live – ‘life which the Germans had denied their enemy’.<sup>9</sup> They did, but the logic of the war without restraint seemed clear in the explosion of troop violence during the advance that left eastern Germany in flames and its women ravished. Violence against women had always been part of this logic. German forces took millions of Soviet women as slave labour to Germany, fewer as sexual slaves into the bordellos that dotted the Soviet occupation landscape. Where the bordellos did not suffice in number or taste, the Germans raped widely in the chasms between.<sup>10</sup> Women’s labour was booty and their bodies a spoil of war. This sparked a fierce propaganda campaign in the Soviet press, calling soldiers to protect their womenfolk from the ‘fascist beasts’ and avenge those whom they could not.<sup>11</sup> At times, propaganda leaflets appeared that described the rapes in detail, complete with photographs of the mutilated bodies.<sup>12</sup> It is not surprising, then, that some soldiers raped the women

(Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2002), 387–9. Soviet forces also tried to conduct a scorched earth policy in 1941, removing their citizens and valuable machinery, livestock, etc. to the rear while retreating from German forces.

<sup>7</sup> Edele and Geyer, ‘States of Exception’, 380. <sup>8</sup> Ibid. <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>10</sup> Official race laws prohibiting race-mixing (*Rassenschande*) between German forces and Soviet civilians were largely ignored by the Wehrmacht. J. Burds, ‘Sexual Violence in Europe in World War II 1939–1945’, *Politics and Society* 37, no. 1 (2009): 42.

<sup>11</sup> M. Edele, ‘Paper Soldiers: The World of the Soldier Hero according to Soviet Wartime Posters’, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 47, no. 1 (1999): 102.

<sup>12</sup> Pisiotis argues in his study of wartime propaganda that it was rare for images of raped women or detailed accounts of such crime to appear in the Soviet press, A. K. Pisiotis, ‘Images of Hate in War’, in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*, ed. R. Stites

## 6 The explosion of violence

who remained in eastern Germany indiscriminately, old and young, fascist and communist, attractive and not. Historians have offered further explanations for the rapes, exploring the symbolism of rape in war and the sexual peculiarities of the Red Army and, indeed, Stalinist society. They help to explain why soldiers raped so extensively and publicly, often in front of German men.<sup>13</sup> They also help explain how a soldier's pain at any aspect of the German occupation – the murder of his relatives or the destruction of his village – could be channelled towards sexual violence. But in the chaos of the advance and disintegration of military discipline where much became permissible, more direct, less symbolic reasons remained in play. Soldiers were often blind drunk, sex-starved for years and couldn't be bothered looking for four standing walls in the rubble to rape women in private, German or not. In the place of slavery, forced starvation and mass exterminations – the hallmarks of the German occupation – rape became widespread in 1945.

Looting and wanton destruction more so. Soldiers marvelled at the solid-cut stone manors in the countryside of East Prussia, filled with preserved foods, polished furniture, and full-sized mirrors, filled with everything unavailable in their impoverished villages back home. Faced with the question of why such a rich nation as Germany would invade and try to enslave their own poor utopia, the soldiers simply smashed to pieces all the wonderful things they couldn't loot. They razed the mansions to the ground and killed the remaining rich landowners as their fathers had done to their own back in 1917 at the time of the revolution.

Stalin excused them then and now. He said he would not indict his soldiers for having 'fun with a woman or some trifle' when they had crossed Europe over the dead bodies of their comrades and dearest ones to liberate the continent.<sup>14</sup> Many of his military commanders agreed with him out of conviction or necessity. They did little to stop the violence meted out to German civilians during the advance, feeling that it was

(Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press 1995), 143. Any reading of the soldier newspapers, such as *Krasnaia Zvezda* (Red Star) supports this viewpoint. There were, however, many exceptions to this trend, most notably during the latter stages of the war in other forms of media subject to less central control such as leaflets, etc. A full reprint of one such leaflet can be found in Burds, 'Sexual Violence in Europe', 48.

<sup>13</sup> Naimark and Merridale offer the most useful explanations. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 109–16, Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 309–20. For a discussion of wartime rape in Germany and its relationship to historical memory see A. Grossman, 'A Question of Silence: The Rape of German Women by Occupation Soldiers', *October* 72 (1995) as well as articles in the special edition of the following journal dedicated to this topic: *Violence against Women* 12, no. 7 (2006), especially J. W. Messerschmidt, 'The Forgotten Victims of World War II Masculinities and Rape in Berlin, 1945', and K. V. Bletzer, 'A Voice for Every Woman and the Travesties of War'.

<sup>14</sup> M. Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin*, trans. M. B. Petrovich (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 110.

simply a natural process of justice playing itself out, one in which they need not interfere.

Unlike their German counterparts, however, Soviet commanders had not ordered that mass violence be meted out to civilians as a policy of pacification and certainly not desertification. But it didn't matter. Now the logic of the war did not need to be articulated in orders and, in any case, commanders could do little to change it. Crossing the dead zones, soldiers had learnt how civilians should be pacified. The reams of army newspapers calling for vengeance against anyone and anything German reflected the mood of the troops as much as it exacerbated it. Yet it soon became clear to many commanders in a matter of days and weeks that the violence and the propaganda could not continue, if they were to finish the war anytime soon and have any chance of administering the lands they had conquered. The logic of the war which demanded it be waged without restraint no longer made sense in Germany.

Even at the beginning of February, military operations were suffering with so many soldiers binge-drinking, seeking out women and loot rather than preparing for battle. Insubordination was rife. Those officers who cared to look struggled to keep track of their men's whereabouts, especially when they exchanged their military uniform for smart German suits. Expectedly, German military resistance stiffened as news of Soviet violence fused with old images of the 'Russian beast' sped westward ahead of the advance. Commanders also feared that, far from the violence pacifying civilians, it would spark a partisan movement as it did back home. Something had to be done to save the army from disintegrating before it could reach Berlin and end the war.<sup>15</sup>

Then there was the question of what to do once the war was over. The plan was to defeat German forces and pacify conquered areas to administer them better, even to feed the population, not evacuate them and make eastern Germany uninhabitable. But soldiers were burning towns to the ground for no apparent military reason, exacerbating housing shortages in eastern Germany, not only for the Germans but for their own liberated citizens as well. They were destroying factories that dismantling teams were lining up to remove and send back to the Soviet Union as war reparations. The threat of violence was discouraging Germans from working with the Red Army to help reconstruct essential services. Farmers were too afraid to work in the fields.<sup>16</sup> This is to say nothing of how the

<sup>15</sup> See the reprint of a speech delivered to 'political workers' in the Red Army on 6 February 1945, which discusses the multitude of these self-inflicted problems facing the army and their proposed solutions. Senjavskaia, *Frontovoe pokolenie*, 199–202.

<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 8.

## 8 The explosion of violence

long-term impact of mass rape would complicate any political structures that the Soviets planned to build in post-war Germany.

Even though many military commanders became aware of this looming catastrophe quickly and began to issue orders to stamp out the violence and restore order, they did so in a language unrecognisable to the troops – officers and men.<sup>17</sup> They lamented that no one understood Stalin's clear distinction between Hitlerite criminals and ordinary Germans, especially those whose families had suffered under German occupation. No one understood the new propaganda line that now specified that they were supposed to wreak their vengeance on the battlefield, not in the rear.<sup>18</sup> Commanders sometimes executed rapists in front of their units to make the men understand that rape was not permissible,<sup>19</sup> but with insubordination rife, such executions could only be staged sparingly.

If commanders experienced trouble communicating with soldiers whose families suffered, had been killed, kidnapped, or wounded by German occupation forces, then what of those soldiers who had suffered themselves? Commanders looked with hope upon the POWs whom they had liberated from captivity in Germany as a new source of manpower, perhaps physically drained, but seething to avenge their bondage on the battlefield and prove their loyalty to the motherland. That loyalty was in doubt as, according to Soviet law, a soldier was either dead or in service. A POW was a traitor who had failed to fight to the death and, if an officer, should be shot upon discovery and his family arrested.<sup>20</sup> Understandably, the POWs went to great lengths to convince their liberators that they had not surrendered to the Germans, but had been knocked unconscious in battle or wounded severely.<sup>21</sup> They tore off their shirts to reveal old, unhealed wounds to prove to their interrogators that they weren't able to shoot themselves before falling into captivity, like all good and dead soldiers.

But the commanders were interested less in their excuses and more in their redemption. In March 1945, 40,000 liberated POWs were re-enlisted into the armies on the 1st Ukrainian Front in south-eastern

<sup>17</sup> Seniavskaia, *Frontovoe pokolenie*, 197.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. For an extract of Stalin's order to the troops in early 1942, see Edele and Geyer, 'States of Exception,' 369.

<sup>19</sup> See Merridale's study of memoir literature on this point, Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 320.

<sup>20</sup> Stalin's orders no. 270 (August 1941) and no. 227 (July 1942) were unpublished, but were conveyed verbally in each company of the Red Army, in *Russkii arkhiv: Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina: Prikazy narodnogo komissara oborony SSSR, 22 iunia 1941g.–1942 g.*, vol. XIII (Moscow: Terra 1997), 57–8, 275–9.

<sup>21</sup> *Russkii arkhiv: Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina: Bitva za Berlin*, vol. xv (Moscow: Terra, 1995), 148–52.

Germany for the final offensive on Berlin.<sup>22</sup> Thousands of others too ill or suspect to fight were sent to field hospitals or detainment camps run by the feared secret police. At the political classes where German brutalities were discussed to rouse the troops before battle, those enlisted offered first-hand accounts of how their comrades had been exterminated, worked to death and tortured in captivity. They spoke of the Germans as wretched vermin. Now that they were armed, they relished the opportunity to take their vengeance. Their enthusiasm was infectious. They promised to fight bravely to avenge the wrongs committed against them and prove their loyalty to the motherland. One private told his liberator/interrogator that he and his fellow POWs ‘needed to fight especially hard to cleanse themselves of the shameful stain of fascist captivity’ and, implicitly, avoid the Gulag upon their return home.<sup>23</sup> Most fulfilled their promise. One officer was re-enlisted to a rifle battalion on the Front after spending two years in German captivity, killed ten German soldiers and took nine prisoner in his first battle – his unit killed fifty.<sup>24</sup> Others died charging into German fire and undertaking suicide missions, earning posthumous medals for bravery. The examples are endless.<sup>25</sup>

Commanders were elated with the progress of many of their POW recruits in the final battles of the war, especially with those who died on the field. But many of the new recruits survived, and the end of the war did nothing to dampen their enthusiasm for revenge and ‘cleanliness’. Some had deserted in battle and had wreaked havoc in Germany along with repatriates, but most were still serving in Red Army ranks after the war. Commanders who had lauded the recruits’ courage and ferocity in battle now complained about their violent behaviour towards the occupied population. Some commanders derided the recruits as worse than the liberated slaves for the continuing raping and pillaging.<sup>26</sup>

If they were right, it would have been much easier to stop the violence after the war. But they were wrong. It was convenient to blame the ‘mentally unstable’ POWs, but they did not attack the Germans any

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 148. <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 152. <sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Depending partly on their ‘reliability’, POWs were enlisted into their old, ordinary, or penal units advancing into Germany. In an attempt to shore up failing discipline in the Red Army and stop disorganised retreats, penal units were established by Stalin in July 1942 (order no. 227). Servicemen now found guilty of serious and, eventually, not so serious offences were to be transferred to penal units to ‘atone for their crimes against the Motherland with their blood’. These units, as in the Russian Civil War, were often sent to the most dangerous areas of the front and charged with suicide missions. See A. Statiev, ‘Penal Units in the Red Army’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 5 (2010).

<sup>26</sup> Some of the ‘liberated slaves’ were, in fact, POWs who were not drafted into military service or placed under arrest upon their release. For POW violence in Brandenburg, see GARF – f. r-7077, op. 1, d. 178, l. 7, for Saxony GARF – f. r-7212, op. 1, d. 51, l. 94.



10 The explosion of violence

more or less than other soldiers. This was really the problem – each soldier had his own tragedy, his own memories of burnt-out villages and murdered relatives to draw upon. Many felt little difference between their own suffering, that of their families, or, indeed, that of their nation. In any case, the troops had been constantly reminded of all these sufferings by the visceral anti-German propaganda with which the army was saturated. The impact of such trauma and propaganda on millions of individual soldiers defies accurate analysis, allowing us to speak only generally about the links between it and their behaviour. Many attacked German civilians, many did not. Alcohol was usually an important factor. When it was involved, the violence could be so chaotic that not only German women, but any women, were targeted.

The ability of commanders to make their conquered areas habitable by reconstructing essential services and a rationing system within this chaos was nothing short of remarkable. Many of them who laboured so constructively were studious communists, but poor students of their erstwhile German occupiers. Although subjected to severe anti-German propaganda during the war, they had difficulty in assuming the same dehumanised attitude towards ‘enemy civilians’ that the Germans had mastered. They could not look on other human beings as subhumans who could only muster some unintelligible speech and were fit for slavery and nothing else. This distinction is most evident in the other scribbled testimonies that fill the archives – those of captured German soldiers under interrogation. Soviet interrogators poked and prodded the men to confess the sordid details of their conduct in the Soviet Union. They wanted names, dates, and locations of mass killings, rapes, robberies, and every single humiliation wrought on the Soviet people. But they often received little insight from the frightened soldiers. The interrogators were not surprised by the reluctance of the soldiers to speak about their crimes, but by the reason they gave for it. A young German soldier from the 267th Infantry Division interned in a makeshift POW camp during 1945 explained:

It is difficult to remember all the crimes committed by our division, as they occurred quite frequently. Brought up on contempt towards the Russian people, we officers and soldiers of the German army did not pay any attention to them, as the life of a Russian person has no value whatsoever in our understanding.<sup>27</sup>

Many civilians in Germany felt the same. Pounded by years of Nazi propaganda that radicalised old anti-Slavic stereotypes, many understood the mass rapes in eastern Germany only as an affirmation of the Russian ‘subhuman’ character. If Russians were sub-human, then according to the

<sup>27</sup> GARF – f. r-7021, op. 148, d. 30, l. 2.

German racial hierarchy the ‘Mongolians’ in the Red Army were simply animals. Wide-eyed with supposedly yellowing sharp teeth and flat, ape-like faces, the Germans scoffed at their raping as a form of bestiality rather than sex. Many of them felt that it was just another example of how fate had dealt them an unfair hand.<sup>28</sup> After all, they were just the innocent civilians led astray by a criminal leadership. Many Red Army officers committed to stopping the violence found this attitude exceedingly obnoxious. Even when Stalin began speaking more and more of good Germans and bad Nazis near the end of the war, these attitudes tested the resolve of the officers to risk their lives to restrain their men. They were buoyed, however, by their interactions with many Germans who adopted a different approach to dealing with the Red Army. Upon seeing his house burned to the ground by marauding Red Army soldiers in East Prussia in February 1945, one farmer confided to an onlooking Soviet officer, each as helpless as the other to put a stop to the carnage:

I know what German soldiers did in Russia. I know the Russian attitude towards the Germans. Thus I understand that malice, with which you Russians look at us.<sup>29</sup>

Such attitudes were widespread among ‘anti-fascists’ in Germany. The Soviets recruited allies from their ranks to rebuild war-torn Germany. Together, they laboured towards this end, and were equally disappointed at how the violence compromised their ability to achieve it. The violence got worse in the final stages of the war and its immediate aftermath, when the Red Army liberated millions of slave labourers in Germany. As discussed above, some had been POWs and were drafted back into the army for the final battles, but most were deemed unfit for service. Others were just civilians who had been kidnapped from their homelands by German forces or been duped into volunteering for work in Germany by the placards strewn across Ukraine and Belorussia promising them an escape from the ravages of occupation. Whoever they were, they now either had scores to settle with the Germans or good reason to avoid the Soviet authorities, who considered the volunteers traitors. Either way, the liberated could not have cared less about how their rampaging for food, booty, and justice in eastern Germany made SVAG’s task of administering the country difficult, if not impossible to carry out. This was one of many ‘bad inheritances’ received by SVAG after the war, which they would fight tooth and nail to disavow.

<sup>28</sup> German complaints about low food rations were especially a source of frustration for Soviet officers. See Chapter 8.

<sup>29</sup> RGASPI – f. 17, op. 125, d. 318, ll. 20–1.