

Milton, Sybil. "Women and the Holocaust." In *When Biology Became Destiny*. ed. Renate Bridenthal, Atine Grossman, and Marion Kaplan. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984. 297-333 pp. Chapter and notes.

Thesis: Sybil Milton seeks to understand the particular dangers and humiliations that woman faced during the Holocaust. She also wants to explore how women used "their own unique resources for day-to-day survival." (p. 297) She makes careful mention that gender specific studies in Holocaust are in their "infancy" and that it is too early to fully understand all its nuances. The editors point out that Milton's work focuses on "German and German-Jewish Woman, both racial victims and political opponents." (Editor's preface, p. 297).

Themes: Milton's theme is the female experience in the holocaust. She begins an overall introduction of the life of women in Germany right after Hitler assumed power. First, political opponents were targeted. "Women socialist, communist, and moderate liberal parliamentary deputies" were some of the first targets."(Milton, 298) Thereafter "wives, sisters, and daughters" of male political adversaries were arrested, for the actions of their absentee male relatives."(p. 299)

The camps for women that Milton discusses are gender-specific penal and correctional institutions or workhouses. She lists each of the six and gives a brief rundown of conditions. Most were "overcrowded", "had inadequate food" and were worked by guards who were "exceedingly brutal." (p. 303)

Max Koegal, one of the Dachau trained directors of Lichtenburg camp, gives rise to the crux of Milton's argument: the fact that female inmates were treated differently than males simply because they were female. In a letter to the Inspector of the Concentration camps, Koegal refers to the prisoners: "It is impossible," writes Koegal, "to maintain order if the defiance and stubbornness of these hysterical females cannot be broken by strict confinement, since no more severe punishment can be used in a women's camp."(p. 306)

This letter also indicates that there were already strict rules in place for what could and could not be done inside a women's camp. Solitary confinement was the severest form of punishment that was allowed and Koegal intended to place every single female prisoner in it.

Milton also discusses some of the themes that have been discussed earlier in class. The fact that some woman served as domestic servants in SS homes (Milton, 314) and how the fact that while some Jewish women were forced to work in bordellos and were frequently raped was the exception rather than the norm, and had been exploited and sensationalized for "popular titillation."(p. 315)

Style: Milton writes her prose in a very straightforward and matter-of-fact style. The author's work is easier to read and her points can be followed with no problems. Each fact or example build on the previous and is in turn built upon by

the subsequent sections. The work is only one chapter in a larger work on the same subject, so the work is no doubt condensed. For anyone unfamiliar with the female experience during the Holocaust, this short work serves well as a primer.

Evidentiary Base: Milton notes indicate the use of primary sources. Letters, such as the one from Koegal, and some memoirs are listed. The other works, aside from names mentioned in class, such as Friedlander, are hard to distinguish whether or not they are primary or secondary sources. Milton does not state that some statistics for certain years are unavailable or unknown. This short work contains 134 extensive notes. Milton goes beyond just citing the source and explains why the source she used is the best for that. Explaining this in the notes helped the work flow, without intermittent hiccups by statistical charts and graphs.

Weaknesses: As with all books on any topic in its “infancy” some of the claims seem to be a little far reaching. Specifically the inclusion of Commandant Hoss’ letter emphasizing that the women supervisors that he was sent from Ravensbruck were not the best, that they had been spoiled, and most wanted to return to the quiet comfortable life there. (p. 309) Milton shows this as an ironic twist of SS women suffering sex discrimination. The word “women” could be replaced with the word “men” and the meaning of Hoss’ tirade does not change. Likely as not, the Commandant would have been just as displeased of the ineffectiveness regardless of sex.

Strengths: Milton’s work is well written and appears to be well researched. The collection of information for a subject that was breaking new ground is very important. While the victims take the lion’s share of the research, they are not solely investigated. Milton’s discussion on the scant data for uniformed SS women paints a more complete picture of how the complexities of being a woman during this time compounded upon the complexities of the times.

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