

The horrific events that were carried out by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Holocaust have been very well documented by historians. These historians, however, have approached writing about this grave topic in a variety of ways. One approach that has received a significant amount of attention in the last few decades is the writing of women's experiences in the Holocaust. As Lisa Pine explains in her article, "Gender and the Family," the study of women in the Holocaust was a profound addition to Holocaust history, as their experiences were largely ignored before the 1970s.¹ The inclusion of women into the writing of the Holocaust, however, has resulted in a debate that centres on whether or not women had different experiences than men, or alternatively, if victims' experiences were universal. Within this debate, a number of questions have emerged. While one question attempts to discover the reasons why women's experiences may have been unique, the other attempts to shed light on how a gendered narrative of the Holocaust may de-emphasize the fact that *all* victims suffered in some way. This survey will outline the fundamental arguments that surround this debate; it will highlight which argument is the most persuasive, and it will discuss the importance of this debate in the study of the Holocaust.

According to Lisa Pine, the incorporation of women into the writing of the Holocaust was made possible by historian Joan Ringelheim. During the 1980s, Ringelheim published the article, "The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust," and was able to successfully illustrate how Holocaust literature was too

¹ Lisa Pine, "Gender and the Family," in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 364.

“gender neutral.”² To gain a more comprehensive understanding of women’s experiences and perspectives, Ringelheim encouraged historians to re-examine the various modes of “survival, resistance, the maintenance or collapse of moral values, and the dysfunction of culture in the camps and ghettos.”³ By doing so, Ringelheim essentially paved the way for other historians to further explore and expose the stories and voices of the Holocaust’s female victims.

Among the historians influenced by Ringelheim were Sybil Milton, Ruth Bondy, Michal Unger, and Dalia Ofer. Their works effectively demonstrate the tendency for some historians to write about women in the Holocaust by focusing on how their experiences differed from those of men. However, while their underlying argument is generally the same, these historians have approached the topic in a number of ways. At the forefront of this approach, when it began to build in the 1980s, was Sybil Milton.⁴ To illustrate the differences between men’s and women’s experiences, Milton focused primarily on survival patterns inside concentration camps.⁵ She argued that women’s traditional gender roles—that encompassed activities such as sharing recipes, cleaning to prevent disease, and mending clothes—provided them with unique tools to aid in their survival.⁶ Similarly, Ruth Bondy, Michal Unger, and Dalia Ofer have also examined how women in the Holocaust dealt with the severe restrictions forced upon them by using typically female skills. More specifically, Bondy explains that women often transformed their bunks into “surrogate home[s],” while Unger describes how women used everyday

² Lisa Pine, “Gender and the Family,” 364, and Joan Ringelheim, “The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust,” in *Comprehending the Holocaust: Historical and Literary Research*, eds. A. Cohen, et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1988).

³ Lisa Pine, “Gender and the Family,” 365.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

activities like baking to cope with their changing situations.⁷ Likewise, Ofer reveals that women used their resourcefulness to barter, smuggle, and even prostitute themselves, in order to assure that their families survived.⁸

Contrastingly, Lisa Pine draws attention to a number of other scholars who have argued that an examination of the victims' experiences during the Holocaust should *not* be based on gender. For example, Lawrence Langer argues that gendered histories of the Holocaust will create ““myth[s] of comparative endurance”” that are likely founded on misleading ““situational accident[s].””⁹ What Langer is suggesting here is that examples like female solidarity, which are used by other historians to portray distinctive female coping methods, may have been a result of conditions imposed upon them by the Nazis or their collaborators. In this case, Langer suggests that women stayed together more often than men because of their work situations, not because of typical gender practices.¹⁰ Likewise, Gabriel Schoenfeld posits that portraying the Holocaust in gendered terms could allow a “feminist agenda” to overshadow the brutal treatment and suffering of the Jews.¹¹ Thus, to Langer and Schoenfeld, the Holocaust clearly exhibits universal suffering, and to view it in any other light would be an injustice to the victims.

When researching and writing about women in the Holocaust, Anna Hardman and Zoë Waxman offer a different approach. Although they agree that women's inclusion in Holocaust history is paramount in order fully understand the horrific event, they have revealed that there are problems that can arise from certain research methods. As Lisa

⁷ Lisa Pine, “Gender and the Family,” 367-68.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 368.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 371, and Lawrence Langer, “Gendered Suffering? Women in Holocaust Testimonies,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Ofer and Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 362.

¹⁰ Lisa Pine, “Gender and the Family,” 371.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Pine explains, Anna Hardman criticizes historians' usage of women's testimony. More specifically, Hardman asserts that in attempting to prove that there was a unique female experience, many historians have painted a homogenized picture of their experiences and identities, which is unrepresentative.¹² Hardman suggests that historians should perform more individual examinations to capture the diversity within this female experience. Similarly, Zoë Waxman scrutinizes works that are limited to tales of “love and courage” as they tend to “overlook the desperate actions undertaken by victims in order to survive.”¹³ Hardman and Waxman have extremely convincing arguments, and therefore, I believe that the individual assessment that they are encouraging is by far the best approach when writing about women in the Holocaust.

The inclusion of women in the history of the Holocaust is indeed crucial to fully understanding the event in its entirety. However, writing a narrative that sets out to represent all women in the Holocaust is problematic, and it is clear that this approach will overshadow and detract from the experience of the individual. Recognition that women's experiences were not uniform can bring to light many aspects that were previously overlooked by historians. For example, in the concentrations camps that many Holocaust victims occupied, there was a defined hierarchy; the same was true in the women's barracks. Women's experiences, therefore, were different based on their position in camps—whether they were “privileged” like the *Kapos*, or if they were prisoners without rank. An examination of these women's experiences, then, could shed light on if or how brutal these female *Kapos* were. Likewise, many of the desperate actions undertaken by women attempting to survive, or instances of bravery and heroism that may have

¹² Lisa Pine, “Gender and the Family,” 372.

¹³ *Ibid.*

occurred, could also be revealed.¹⁴ Moreover, Women's experiences likely differed according to the type of work they performed at forced labour camps, their age, or if they were able to stay with some of their family. Approaching the writing of women in the Holocaust from an individual standpoint in mind will allow for a consideration of all of these factors, and will portray a holistic version of this history.

Furthermore, an in-depth examination of women's individual experiences will expose women's feelings more than a study that generalizes them. As a result, readers will be able to understand why female victims carried out certain acts of desperation, or whether certain responses were undertaken strategically or because of engrained gender roles. Additionally, a better understanding of what aspects of camp or ghetto life women feared the most, how they reacted emotionally to their family's murder, or how they dealt with personal attacks such as rape, will be made available.

The importance of the debate over women's experiences in the Holocaust lies in the fact that it allows readers to make an informed decision regarding the relationship between victims' experiences and gender. In other words, readers will be able to determine if society's prescribed gender roles hindered or aided men and women in their survival efforts. As Lisa Pine has explained, if women's experiences were in fact different, then "universal concepts, such as isolation of prisoners and the destruction of values, are rendered inapplicable."¹⁵ As a result, historians will have to re-write much of the narrative written in the past in order to adequately show these differences. For historians, more implications have surfaced due to the problems that this debate has brought to light. One such example is the exclusion of taboo topics such as women who

¹⁴ Lisa Pine, "Gender and the Family," 372.

¹⁵ Ibid., 365.

did not follow traditional gender roles, while lesbianism is another. In the first example, further research will show that there were many women who had to carry out tasks considered to be morally repugnant in their attempt to survive. In the later, examinations of relationships between women in the Holocaust will likely produce more accounts of lesbianism. Although such studies will be beneficial contributions to Holocaust literature, some backlash may occur. Since societal stigmas are still attached to lesbianism, and many of the traditional gender roles of the 1940s still exist today, this new literature may upset the general public as it tends to disintegrate the image of the innocent and helpless victim that is popular while portraying Holocaust victims.

The writing of women in the Holocaust has been steadily evolving since the 1970s. In the writing of this complex history, a number of questions and debates have emerged. The main debate at the crux of this literature centres on whether or not women's experiences in the Holocaust were different than those of men. Found within this debate are a variety of different arguments and approaches. While some historians have attempted to reveal why women's experiences were unique, others have attempted to prove that victims' experiences were universally similar. In order to fully develop either argument, historians will have to pursue different avenues of research. Focusing on testimony rather than statistics, or embarking on comparative studies based on region or time periods, are some examples. Regardless of their findings, historians must not lose sight of the fact that while there may have been a gendered experience in the Holocaust, all victims suffered in some way, shape, or form, and to ignore this fact is a serious injustice.

Bibliography

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