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Rape in Berlin: Facing the truth

Thousands of German women were sexually assaulted near the end of WW II. Brutal payback, a war crime or both?

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Jul. 17, 2009 |



Strand Releasing

Nina Hoss in "A Woman in Berlin."

At first glance, Max Färberböck's World War II melodrama "[A Woman in Berlin](#)" is exactly the kind of worthy but unremarkable foreign-language movie likely to come and go quickly, hitting a few big-city theaters on its way to DVD. But however and wherever you see it, "A Woman in Berlin" is a distinctive achievement, a World War II movie unlike any other and one of the few films ever to address a topic that makes almost everyone want to look away: What happens to women in wartime.

Since long before the time of Helen of Troy -- who was Helen of Sparta until the Trojan prince Paris snatched her -- women's bodies have been among the principal spoils of war. Even in the modern age, when women are theoretically regarded as human beings rather than property, this old pattern has reasserted itself on a regular basis. "A Woman in Berlin" is based on the notorious 1953 memoir by a woman who called herself Anonyma. She was among the thousands of girls and women who were repeatedly raped by occupying Russian soldiers amid the smoldering ruins of Berlin during the chaotic final stages of World War II. As many of the younger and more attractive women did, Anonyma turned to a Red Army officer for protection, preferring to be a kept woman rather than the sex toy of any random infantryman.

There are numerous emotional and political complications to this story, and Färberböck's ruthless, ravishing film doesn't shirk any of them. As played by ice-blond German starlet Nina Hoss (whose makeup and wardrobe remain immaculate through all the abuse), Anonyma is not some dewy-eyed innocent but rather a hardcore Nazi true believer, who assumes the stories about Jewish death camps and Ukrainian village massacres are communist propaganda. As the film makes clear, the Red Army arrives in Berlin in a collective foul mood. Millions of their comrades have died fighting the Germans, who had committed numerous atrocities during their occupation of the Ukraine and western Russia. None of that justifies raping civilian women, but it clearly created a climate where indiscriminate anti-German violence was seen as pure payback.

While "A Woman in Berlin" is definitely a wrenching experience, and one that will push almost any viewer's discomfort buttons, it does not in the end paint a hopeless picture. Anonyma may have supported an unforgivable regime, but it's impossible not to admire her indomitable pride, and she seems to rediscover some basic humanity through her terrible ordeal. The film is full of tense party scenes, poised between camaraderie and violence, as Russian soldiers and German civilians drink together in commandeered apartments, forging the beginnings of a civil society on the edge of total anarchy.

Anonyma's relationship with Andrei (Evgeny Sidikhin), a taciturn Red Army officer with a wife and child back home somewhere, begins as pure business and evolves into something much more complicated. She doesn't much like him at first, and he appears to reciprocate. But there's clearly a sexual spark between them, and he's a powerful man who can protect her from further abuse. You might say that Färberböck has buried a borderline S/M "frenemy" romance about a smashing blonde and a mysterious stranger inside this dark story about an exceedingly dark historical episode. Andrei and Anonyma are doomed by their circumstances -- they aren't equals and never will be -- and they could never have met under normal conditions. But human desire often follows strange pathways, and the connection that forms between them is stormy and intense.

Anonyma's memoir was virtually banned in Germany when it was first published; nobody wanted to add to the shame of the Nazi past by discussing the fact that Berlin's female population had been forced into sex slavery en masse. The book's republication caused a nationwide sensation in 2003, and was followed by Färberböck's film (a big-budget production by European standards). It's another indication that today's Germany is a vastly different place, open to confronting virtually every aspect of its horrific 20th-century past. For those of us elsewhere in the world, this story should serve as a cautionary example: Berlin in 1945 was a bad situation, but hardly a unique one. If we believe such things don't still happen -- and aren't happening today -- when men with guns are put in charge of unarmed women, we're kidding ourselves.

"A Woman in Berlin" is now playing at the [Angelika Film Center](#) in New York, with national release to follow.

-- Andrew O'Hehir