

- **Anonyma.** *Eine Frau in Berlin: Tagebuchaufzeichnungen vom 20. April bis 22. Juni 1945.* Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn Verlag, 2003. 300 S. EUR 19.00, broschiert, ISBN 978-3-8218-4737-5.



Reviewed by Bianka Adams

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[The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect official positions or the views of the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense.]

She began writing her diary on April 20, 1945, when she found three empty notebooks in the apartment directly under the roof of the building that had become her new home after she lost her own to a bomb attack. In the following sixty-two days, the anonymous diarist describes the everyday life of Berliners just before and during the opening days of the Red Army occupation. Without a hint of self-pity, she chronicles the city's descent into a society of *Hoehlenbewohner* (cave dwellers) who will do anything—including prostituting themselves to Russian soldiers—for their next meal (p. 13). Her diary ends with the return of her fiancé, who condemns the way she and the other women in the house compromised traditional moral standards in order to survive.

The author, who obviously belonged to an upper-middle class family, was in her early thirties when these events took place. She had received an excellent education, traveled extensively be-

fore the war, working as a journalist in Moscow, Paris, and London. As a result, she spoke several foreign languages fluently, possessing enough skill in Russian to conduct a simple conversation.

A few years after the war she showed her diary to a friend who convinced her to publish it. The book was translated into English and first appeared in New York in 1954. A German edition followed in 1959. Largely ignored by the reading public in both countries, the book soon vanished from store shelves. The memories of the pain caused by Nazi Germany were still too fresh even for Americans to consider what German civilians had gone through.

Half a century later, the book's time has finally come. The Federal Republic of Germany emerged from the Cold War as a unified country ready to debate the once taboo topic of the cost incurred by German society during World War II as part of its continuing efforts of coming to terms with the past—and without arousing suspicion in other countries of trying to justify Nazi atrocities. The recent success of such works as Jörg Friedrich's *Der Brand* about the ordeal that resi-

dents of German cities suffered at the hands of Allied bombers is proof of that. *Eine Frau in Berlin* is an important contribution to this historical discourse.[1]

To the author writing in her diary has a therapeutic effect. She states, "Ich schreibe, es tut gut, lenkt mich ab [I write, it feels good, distracts me]" (p. 19). The result is more than a simple day-by-day account of the gruesome reality in Berlin immediately after the end of the war. Her poignant and insightful observations demonstrate a remarkable capacity to look beyond personal circumstances in order to discern the bigger picture. She is keenly aware that she lives and suffers through events that will fill the history books of the future. Her rather laconic comment on the daily misery is that history, if experienced first hand, is "sehr lästig [very burdensome]" (p. 26).

Her best writing emerges when she analyzes the impact of the war and subjugation on traditional gender roles. Acutely attuned to her own and other women's feelings, she detects a subtle shift in attitude towards German men. The diarist describes it as a kind of collective disappointment among women with the once dominant and glorified strong man of the Nazi era. She notes that women actually feel pity for the men, because, as it turns out, they are "das schwächliche Geschlecht [the frail sex]" (p. 51).

Although written over a period of two months, almost half of the book deals with the events of the last week in April and the first week in May, when a Russian cavalry unit is quartered in her neighborhood. The entries leading up to the arrival of the Russians acquaint the reader with her *Kellervolk* (those with whom she shares a house cellar as an air raid shelter). Her adroit descriptions of the people and their cellar rituals are so convincing that the reader can almost smell the damp air. During lulls in Allied and Russian bombardments--she is not sure anymore whose bombs they are--she and her cellar mates fulfill their central mission in life: to search for

food to survive. Reflecting on the uncompromising daily struggle, she comes to the conclusion that such situations break down behavioral norms and erode moral codes. Everyone guards their few possessions anxiously from their neighbors and strangers alike, because conventional concepts of property and decency no longer apply. When word goes out that the police have abandoned their barracks, she joins other members of her *Kellervolk* to loot the storage room (p. 47).

As the Russians move closer to Berlin, her feelings of foreboding are nourished by a mixture of rumors, propaganda, and news reports about the raping and plundering Red Army. On April 27, the Russians finally arrive. She records this date as *Tag der Katastrophe*. By nightfall, she and almost every woman in her building have been raped several times. For the next two weeks, a unit of Red Army soldiers remains in her neighborhood, asserting their right to "the spoils of war." Their favorite trophies are wristwatches, alcohol, and women. The author records in brutal detail how she falls victim to several more rapists before she decides to find a protector. She calls it, "ein Wolf muss her, der mir die Wölfe vom Leib hält [There has to be a wolf who will keep away the other wolves]" (p. 75). She locates a Russian officer who not only keeps drunken troops at bay but also provides her with gifts of food. Trading sex for food becomes such common practice that women coin a new term for it: *anschlafen* (acquiring food in return for sleeping with a Russian, a pun on a typical verb for acquiring objects, *anschaffen*). In the midst of her second such arrangement, this time with a more senior officer, she cannot help but wonder whether her behavior qualifies as prostitution. She admits to herself that the second Russian officer does not force himself upon her but that she sleeps with him merely to entice him to continue providing her with food (p. 131).

On May 9, the Russians leave the neighborhood as quickly as they came. The diarist and her

fellow building inhabitants return to the business of survival without interference from Red Army "liberators." A semblance of normalcy slowly returns. The populace begins cleaning up as the occupiers restore water and electricity. In her final entry, she relates the return of her fiancé, Gerd, from the eastern front. He stays for only a short while, however, because he is unable to accept how she weathered the occupation. He finds her and the other women's behavior shameful and devoid of any moral standards (p. 280). The fact that the author insisted on staying anonymous leads to the conclusion that she shared in her fiancé's condemnation of her behavior--but did not see an alternative.

As a historical and literary document, *Eine Frau in Berlin* deserves a place among the famous war diaries by Anne Frank and Victor Klemperer. [2] This book is required reading for anyone who wants to gain an understanding of the trauma experienced by a defeated people at the end of World War II. A new English language edition of the book will be published later this fall.[3]

Notes

[1]. Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2002); see H-German forum at <http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/WWIIbombing/WWII-bombingindex.htm>><http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/WWIIbombing/WWII-bombingindex.htm>.

[2]. Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, trans. B. M. Mooyaart-Doubleday (Garden City: Doubleday, 1952); Victor Klemperer, *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten*, ed. Walter Nowojski (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1995).

[3]. Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin. Six Weeks in the Conquered City: A Diary*, trans. Anthes Bell (New York: Henry Holt and Co., forthcoming: April 2005).

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