

Wartime Relations: Intimacy, Violence, and Prostitution in Occupied Poland, 1939–1945

By Maren Röger. Translated by Rachel Ward. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. v + 212. Cloth \$100.00. ISBN: 978-0198817222.

Jill Suzanne Smith

Bowdoin College

Intimacy is, in the word's most basic sense, about proximity. More often than not, intimacy implies sexual relations. Maren Röger's excellent book, now available in an equally excellent English translation by Rachel Ward, explores the myriad facets of intimacy that existed during the German occupation of Poland in the Second World War: the physical proximity of the occupiers and the occupied, the types of sexual contact that took place between these two groups, and the attempted state regulation and control of that contact. As a racist state, National Socialist Germany was particularly concerned with preserving and enhancing the purported racial superiority of the Germans; this meant that sexual intercourse with Poles, who were seen as racially inferior people, was officially forbidden. And yet, as Röger convincingly shows, the official ban on fraternization between German men and Polish women did not prevent the occupiers from creating a system of regulated prostitution that served the sole purpose of maintaining morale among German soldiers, officers, and civilian administrators, or from simply turning a blind eye to other, more informal types of sexual contact (in restaurants, hotels, and entertainment venues). The German occupiers, therefore, "had the authority to determine the sexual integrity of Polish people" (180). With Michel Foucault's work on sexuality as a key site for the negotiation of power relations as her theoretical frame (something evident throughout the study but articulated explicitly in the epilogue), Röger explores multiple layers of power in occupied Poland—among military and administrative ranks within the Nazi regime and the German army, between Reich Germans and ethnic Germans, between men and women. In so doing, she gives her readers a granular portrait of everyday life in an occupied country and demonstrates how sexuality, gender, and race/ethnicity intersected in the most intimate practices of those who lived there.

The impetus for Röger's study came from the renewed discussion in post-unification Germany of wartime sexual violence perpetrated by the Soviet army against German women, a discussion that was itself brought about by the news of widespread rape during the 1990s Yugoslav wars. These discussions left notable silences, however, surrounding sexual crimes committed by the Germans in World War II, silences that remained through the end of the Cold War and were compounded by the Polish desire to move toward a democratic future without examining its wartime and Soviet-era past. Using rich and varied source material from archives in Germany, Poland, and the United States, including official police, court, and health records, personal documents like letters and memoirs, and oral interviews, many of which she conducted herself with so-called occupation children, Röger breaks the silence surrounding sexual violence in Poland. But this book is so much more than a study of the gendered ravages of war, for Röger soberly and methodically investigates a spectrum of intimate relations, some of them blatantly violent (rape and sexual assault), some coercive and commodified (prostitution, both regulated and clandestine, as well as sexual barter), some consensual (love affairs that resulted in children, even state-sanctioned marriages). As the author repeatedly reminds us, "the boundaries between the three forms of sexual contact were . . . fluid" (16).

Polish women who fraternized with German nationals, for example, faced the potential risk of being forced into prostitution, both as punishment for their transgression of official policy and as moral judgment regarding their sexual behavior. By highlighting this example, Röger takes a phenomenon that had hitherto “remained a footnote in academia” (39) and places it at the center of her study. Characteristic of the dignity with which Röger handles women’s stories is her emphasis on their individual humanity; women who were trafficked from their hometowns to brothels in other Polish cities had families, meaning that “children were left without mothers, men without wives” (42). The example of forced prostitution also exposes the gendered assumptions that were so foundational to the occupiers’ regulation of sexuality—that men’s active sexual desire was a given and deserved to be sated, and that women’s expression of sexual desire was deemed to be wanton, corrupt, and deviant, and therefore needed to be regulated. The sphere of regulated prostitution is more easily documented than other forms of sexual contact and therefore offers a clearer picture of what daily life may have looked like for Polish prostitutes: how many clients visited certain brothels each day? What did prostitutes get paid? What was their average age and typical class background? Röger answers these questions in a frank, straightforward manner, pointing to gaps in the archives when necessary and noting patterns while avoiding sweeping generalizations.

Röger’s steadfast commitment to nuance is evident throughout the book. Despite clear differences in age, education, and gender privilege—German political power notwithstanding—not all Polish women were victims, and not all German men were perpetrators. Soldiers were not an undifferentiated mass, nor were the women who may have seen those soldiers as their only means of survival when food and money were scarce. Some Polish women recognized the power relations that existed in their country and used them to their and their family’s own advantage. Some were even Nazi sympathizers, and some were declared ethnic Germans by having their names added to the *Volkliste*. Power was not always split according to a gender binary; there were Polish women who exploited underage Polish girls, and there were German occupiers who raped Polish men. This degree of nuance does not lapse into moral relativism, however; Röger makes it very clear to her readers who had more agency, who regulated the public sphere, and who was denied rights. Jewish women are the clearest example of the latter; they were systematically disenfranchised, many were coerced into sex by the Poles who hid them, and many were raped or abused before they were murdered by the Nazis. Röger’s book does not gloss over these facts; it presents readers with individual examples of sexual violence against Jewish women which remind us that occupied Poland was the ground on which the mass murder of Jews was carried out.

Eminently readable, rigorously researched, and thoughtfully constructed, Maren Röger’s book demonstrates how important nuanced studies of sexuality and gender can be for our understanding of one of the most broadly researched eras in German and Polish history and for the silences that followed.

doi:10.1017/S0008938922001649

Nationale Solidarität und ihre Grenzen. Die deutsche “Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt” und der französische “Secours national” im Zweiten Weltkrieg

By Daniel Hadwiger. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2021. Pp. 405. Paperback €64.00. ISBN: 978-3515130257.

Alfred C. Mierzejewski

University of North Texas