The Violence of Female Guards in Nazi Concentration Camps (1939-1945): Reflections on the Dynamics and Logics of Power

Article traduit du français par Malcolm Imrie.

Survivors and researchers usually present the concentration camp as the ultimate example of a total institution. The terror so zealously applied by the employees of the Schutzstaffel (SS, protection squadron) in the camps was indeed meticulously planned by the leaders of the SS – first and foremost Heinrich Himmler (Sofsky, 1997; Armanski, 1993; Herbert, Orth and Dieckmann, 1998; Benz and Distel, 2005). Nonetheless, the idea that all terror was systematically organised is somewhat misleading.

Camp regulations certainly gave the guards, like SS officers, the authority to punish prisoners. But this right was subject to strict procedures as, even more so, was the right to kill (Mailänder Koslov 2011; Strebel, 2003). SS guards never officially had the right to use violence on prisoners arbitrarily, still less the right to kill them (service pistols were only to be used in self-defence). On the contrary, they had to follow a strict code of punishments. Its chief purpose Heinrich Himmler’s official visit to Ravensebruck concentration camp, photographed by the SS photography service. Ravensbrück 1940 ou 1941. Archive du mémorial de Ravensbrück MRG/SBG, Foll/D, 10-1622awas to ensure orderly supervision and management of the camp. But despite these regulations and the prohibition on assaulting prisoners, the guards carried out their daily tasks brutally and bloodily. There was a considerable gap between rules and practice.

Using a microanalytic approach, this paper will address this gap by exploring physical violence as a social practice (Lüdtke and Lindenberger, 1995; Sofsky, Kramer and Lüdtke 2004). Through a case study of one specific camp- the concentration and extermination camp of Majdanek where a total of 28 female guards worked between the autumn of 1942 and the spring of 1944 – it will focus on the ‘interplay of actors’ and the everyday experiences, practices and interactions of female SS personnel.

We will compare the careers of two female camp guards, one notorious for her extreme violence, the other judged to be ‘humane’ by survivors. The former, Hermine Braunsteiner, born in Vienna in 1919, started out as an ordinary guard at the Ravensbrück camp (August 1939–October 1942) and finally became head overseer (Lagerführerin) at the Genthin camp (January 1944–May 1945), a subcamp of Sachsenhausen, having been a deputy chief overseer at Majdanek in the interim (October 1942-January 1944). The latter, Herta Ehlert (born in Berlin in 1905), arrived at Ravensbrück in December 1939 and stayed for four years. In January 1943 she was transferred to the concentration and extermination camp of Majdanek.

Braunsteiner and Ehlert are good examples because they were among the first female guards and went on to hold senior positions at Majdanek. What led them to a concentration camp? How did they perform their guard duties? What made them remain in the camps for six and a half years? How did the female guards exercise power over the prisoners? What role did physical violence have in the interplay of actors?

By comparing the behaviour of Braunsteiner, who beat prisoners to death, with that of ‘gentle Ehlert’, we can analyse the margin of manoeuvre in the exercise of power in the camps and take a closer look at the appropriations of violence and power from a microanalytic perspective. We have adopted Michel Foucault’s concept of power, which stands at the centre of his work. Rather than analysing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, we will examine power relations by contrasting different strategies. The exercise of power does not exclude the use of violence, which is applied directly to bodies and things, violence which ‘forces . . . bends . . . breaks on the wheel . . .
destroys’ (Foucault 1983, p. 220). Indeed the two often go hand in hand. On the microhistorical and microsocial level, power and violence are almost inseparable.

As we will show, different forms of violence in the camp arise out of specific situations but also depend on the people who live and work there, their position in the camp, and their place in the hierarchy of guards. It is necessary to situate the various practices of power in their historical specificity and their social asymmetries. Thus this paper focuses on the logic of power in action. It deals with situational socialisation into violence (effects of the social environment supported by gratifications), peer pressure, and the reciprocal influence of all the actors present, whether active or passive.

**Female SS guards employed in concentration camps**

Following a strict gender separation in accordance with the orders of Heinrich Himmler himself, female guards (SS-Aufseherinnen in the terminology of the SS) were only employed in concentration camps for women. These camps were organised in an almost identical way to the camps for men opened in 1933–34 (Erpel, 2007; Schwartz, 2006: 349–374; Schwartz, forthcoming). In the earliest women’s camps, which resembled prisons, at Mohringen (1933–1937) and Lichtenburg (1937–1939), inmates were guarded by prison warders, ordinary members of the Nazi party or militants from the National-Socialist women’s league (NS-Frauenschaft)1. Opened in May 1939, Ravensbrück was the first true SS concentration camp for women (Frauenkonzentrationslager). With it, Himmler also created a new type of female guard.

Female guards had a specific status in the hierarchy. On the one hand, like SS men, they benefited from the status of employees of the Reich, and came under the jurisdiction of the SS. On the other, and unlike their male equivalents, they were not formally members of the SS, did not belong to the SS-Sippschaft, the ‘clan’ (Schwarz, 1997). Their official designation in the terminology, ‘women auxiliaries (weibliches Gefolge) of the Waffen-SS’, indicates their special position: they were civil employees within a paramilitary organisation. The recruitment form for Ravensbrück stated that promotion was possible for suitable candidates already doing appropriate work. They could become head of a subcamp or chief overseer (Oberaufseherin)2. Female guards reported to the Kommandantur, that is, the camp commandant and the higher ranks of the SS, for senior personnel and camp commandants in women’s camps were always men.

Yet to attribute to them a merely subordinate status fails to take full account of the historical reality. Responsible for roll calls, for organising prisoners into kommandos (labour columns), and for supervision of the women inmates in the barracks and at work, the guards exercised direct power over the prisoners.

According to the Ravensbrück recruitment form for guards, the SS were looking for women aged between 21 and 45, preferably single, and ‘no professional skills’ were required3. It was implied that the work was easy “since it is merely guarding prisoners”.. In the beginning, women applied on their own initiative. Erika Buchmann, a former detainee in Ravensbrück, says that jobs as guards were advertised in newspapers (Buchmann, 1959). Starting in 1940, the appointment of guards was usually done through the labour exchanges that had been opened in every town of the Reich (Oppel, 2006). Along with the compulsory Labour Pass or ‘work book’ (Arbeitsbuch) which, from 1935 on, listed the different jobs of every wage-earner, these labour exchanges were the hub of the labour market. They were highly effective control mechanisms because every employee had to be recorded in their lists. Having been opposed to the employment of women, forcing them back into the home, the Nazis now had to adapt their policies to the needs of the economy. In 1938, on the eve of war, not only women already in work but housewives, too, were compelled to register and acquire a Labour Pass (Berger, 1988; Tröger, 1981). An even more rigorous mobilisation took place at the end of 1942 and intensified with the proclamation of total war in 1943. SS cadres from the Ravensbrück camp now began recruiting directly from factories. From 1944, every woman between the ages of 17 and 50 was subject to compulsory registration (Meldepflicht) with a labour exchange. Thus the state could draw on the labour force it needed. Only women who were pregnant or had more than two children under 14 were exempt.
Until June 1941, Ravensbrück was the only women’s camp. With the launch of war against the Soviet Union in June 1941 and the Nazi policy of expansion into Soviet territories, the concentration camp system expanded significantly. The mass deportations of European women of Jewish origin into concentration camps, but also the rise in the number of political prisoners, and of women excluded from the ‘people’s community’ (Volksgemeinschaft), rapidly boosted demand for more female guards. By the end of the war, 13 female camps had been opened, as well as countless subcamps reserved for women, the precise number of which has not yet been established.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concentration camps for women</th>
<th>Opening</th>
<th>Closure/liberation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ravensbrück</td>
<td>15.05.1939</td>
<td>30.04.1945</td>
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<td>Stutthof</td>
<td>21.01.1941</td>
<td>25.04.1945</td>
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<td>Auschwitz I</td>
<td>26.03.1942</td>
<td>August 1942</td>
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<td>Birkenau</td>
<td>August 1942</td>
<td>January 1945</td>
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<td>Lublin-Majdanek</td>
<td>15.08.1942</td>
<td>April 1944</td>
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<tr>
<td>Riga Kaiserwald</td>
<td>15.03.1943</td>
<td>Summer 1944</td>
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<tr>
<td>Herzogenbusch/Vught</td>
<td>12.06.1943</td>
<td>5.09.1944</td>
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<td>Kaunas</td>
<td>15.05.1943</td>
<td>Summer 1945</td>
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<td>Vaivara</td>
<td>15.09.1943</td>
<td>29.06.1944</td>
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<td>Kraków-Płaszów</td>
<td>10.01.1944</td>
<td>Summer 1944</td>
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<td>Mauthausen</td>
<td>5.07.1944</td>
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<td>Bergen-Belsen</td>
<td>7.08.1944</td>
<td>15.04.1945</td>
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<td>Flossenbürg</td>
<td>14.03.1945</td>
<td>23.04.1945</td>
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Source: Schwarz (1994: 38). See also Schwarz (1990)

With the exception of Ravensbrück, all the camps were female enclaves within camps for men (Strebel, 1998). The female guards performed the same supervisory duties as their male colleagues, but did not take part in the process of mass killings. Killing was reserved for SS men. Women did not participate in gassings or mass shootings though they selected victims and guarded prisoners outside the gas chambers.

The total number of female guards who served in Nazi concentration camps from May 1939 to May 1945 can only be estimated. Nazi statistics for January 1945 show 3,508 female camp guards as opposed to 37,674 male SS. The figures change with the progress of the war and the expansion of the concentration camp system. But the proportions of men and women remain constant throughout the entire period: a few dozen women, but thousands of men. Only at Ravensbrück were female SS employees in the majority.

### The paths to the camps: recruitment of female guards

Like most of the female guards recruited by the SS, Hermine Braunsteiner and Herta Ehlert came from the working class. Both of them left school after the compulsory eight years and were unmarried when they joined the SS. As a teenager in Vienna, Braunsteiner found employment as a maid, then as an unskilled worker. She lived with her parents in difficult financial circumstances. She tried to leave crisis-torn Austria for the Netherlands, intending to train as a nurse there, but without success. In 1936, Braunsteiner obtained a place as an au pair in London but left Britain after the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany on 13 March 1938, fearing that war would break out but also hoping that the new situation might offer her a chance to realise her dream of becoming a nurse. Her hopes came to nothing, and all she eventually managed to get was a job in a munitions factory near Berlin. She did not enjoy this work, which was exhausting and badly paid (64 Reichsmarks, RM, net per month from which 9.60 RM were deducted for lodging and transport). But she wanted to keep her financial independence and not return to her family (Mailänder Koslov, 2003:
When the landlord of the flat she rented near Berlin, who was a policeman, told her that the commandant of the camp at Ravensbrück, recently opened 80 km from Berlin, was looking for female guards, the 20-year-old Braunsteiner applied straight away.

Braunsteiner arrived at Ravensbrück on 15 August 1939, with the service number 386. Her colleague Herta Ehlerthad trained as a saleswoman, and, by her own account, was running the branch of a shop when she was forcibly recruited through a labour exchange. Since we have no documentation relating to her appointment on 15 November 1939, this cannot be verified. It is much more likely that she was unemployed and/or applied voluntarily, like the majority of female guards recruited on the opening of the camp.

Braunsteiner and Ehlert fitted the profile of women targeted by the SS: aged between 21 and 45, from working-class backgrounds, and with no professional training. The SS counted on the gratitude and loyalty of these willing and tractable recruits. For women who had to make their own living and sometimes help their families as well, service in the SS was an important step up the social ladder and offered welcome financial security.

As guards, the women gained the status of employees of the Reich, with salaries fixed according to the civil service pay scale. An unmarried guard aged 25 received – according to the Ravensbrück recruitment form – 185.68 RM per month. Once social security contributions, tax, and the cost of board and lodging in the SS sector of the camp were deducted, this left 105.10 RM net (the equivalent of 9 £ at the time). By way of comparison, an unmarried woman working in the textile industry in 1944 earned a gross monthly salary of around 76 RM (Winkler, 1977: 202; Heike, 1994: 224). As a guard, Braunsteiner earned nearly twice as she had as a factory worker. For an unskilled young woman, a guard’s pay was clearly attractive.

Professional dissatisfaction or the wish to escape intolerable working conditions were the main factors that motivated women to apply to Majdanek: the majority of these women were either unemployed, or stuck in exhausting and monotonous factory jobs. Service in the SS offered them job security and, for their social level, very good wages, along with privileges (cheap accommodation and meals, uniform, etc.). Applying for such a job did not necessarily imply any political commitment or ideological motivation, but rather the desire for higher social status and a degree of comfort.

Historians often seem surprised that these women signed up voluntarily, but our research shows the logic of their choice. Nonetheless it is true that the young women who were recruited in 1939, at the height of Nazi triumphalism, showed few signs of any scruples. Like everyone in Nazi Germany, they would have heard reports and rumours about the concentration camps, which until 1940 mainly held German and Austrian political prisoners. But the fresh recruits probably had no clear idea of what awaited them, and they did not ask themselves too many questions. It is important to bear in mind that the vast majority of Germans believed that the camps were legitimate and acceptable places to intern political opponents and those judged ‘antisocial’.

But one question still remains: how can an ordinary factory worker and a saleswoman transform themselves, in a few short weeks, into SS guards ‘ready for action’? When they arrived in Ravensbrück, Braunsteiner, Ehler and the other recruits were not ‘experts in terror’. They became that in a specific social context and a specific institutional space.

So we need to take a closer look at their initial ‘concentrational experience’. The concentration camp was a socio-cultural environment and a living and working reality that the guards experienced, interpreted and adapted in different and contradictory ways. Michael Pollack developed the concept of ‘concentrational experience’ in order to gain insight into the process of adaption to camplife and the survival strategies of Auschwitz inmates. It could be said that female SS guards, during their compulsory three-month training at Ravensbrück, also lived through a ‘concentrational experience’ – though obviously one very different from that of the prisoners.

It was in this camp that female SS guards were confronted with the ‘concentrational universe’ (Rousset, 1946) for the first time. A survivor of Ravensbrück, the ethnologist Germaine Tillion, describes how a recruit becomes an SS guard:
The beginners usually appeared frightened upon first contact with the camp, and it took some time to attain the level of cruelty and debauchery of their seniors. Some of us made a rather grim little game of measuring the time it took for a new Aufseherin to win her stripes. One little Aufseherin, twenty years old, who was at first so ignorant of proper camp ‘manners’ that she said ‘excuse me’ when walking in front of a prisoner, needed exactly four days to adopt the requisite manner, although it was totally new for her. (This little one no doubt had some special gifts in the ‘arts’ we are dealing with here.) As for the others, a week or two, a month at the most, was an average orientation period. (Tillion, 1975: 69)

It only took a few weeks to transform the shocked, frightened and clumsy newcomers into confident guards, capable of using verbal and physical violence on the prisoners. This striking contrast, described by numerous survivors, between the initial reactions of fear and their behaviour once they had ‘adapted’ raises new questions. What happened during the first weeks? How was training carried out? What did it mean for a young woman recruit to live in a concentration camp and wear a uniform? And finally, what made the work ‘attractive’ and kept the young recruits in the camp?

In order to explore the process of initiation and adaptation of the SS women to the reality of the camps, we propose two lines of enquiry: the power to act, and the experience of power through architecture and the uniform.

**Initiation into the work of a guard: disciplining the future guards through architecture and the uniform**

Of course concentration camps were institutions where people were imprisoned and supervised, on the basis of criteria that were initially political and subsequently racial. But for the SS personnel, these same camps were also places where they lived and worked, run according to military rules. The architecture of the camp at Ravensbrück, and in particular of the living quarters of the SS, shows the intention of supervising and disciplining the personnel. Life at the camp was a barracks life, if by barracks we understand an enclosed living and working environment, access to which is regulated and supervised. The guards could only go out through an official exit and needed a pass to do so. Their use of time, their space, their movements and their activities were all organised and regulated according to military rules.

As Foucault has argued, discipline organises an analytical space which arranges the circulation and movements of people and distributes bodies in space and time (Foucault, 1991: 135–169). It is a matter of ‘exercising upon [the body] a subtle coercion, of obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself – movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body’ (ibid.: 137). Institutions like the convent, the boarding school, the factory, the barracks, the hospital, just like the concentration camps, all make use of the same meticulous techniques, innocent in appearance, which until now have lost none of their power. Their aim is to maximise the efficiency of work and to neutralise the effects of ‘counter-power’ or what Alf Lüdtke calls Eigen-Sinn, a brief stepping-back from compliance, a distancing from the acceptance of constraints, without, however, seriously questioning their overall framework (Lüdtke: 1993). Such a ‘micro-physics of power’ allows the transformation of recruits into ‘docile’ and ‘useful’ guards.

The houses and flats built for the female guards remain unique in the Nazic onzentational system. In all the other women’s camps, including Majdanek, female supervisory personnel lived in the barracks or in existing buildings. It was at Ravensbrück, the central concentration camp for women, that in 1939 Himmler had new accommodation built specifically for the new female guards.
Female wardens’ houses built in 1939, photographed by the SS photography service. Ravensbrück, 1940 or 1941. Archive du mémorial de Ravensbrück MGR/SBG Fo II/D10-1639

The guards’ houses were recorded by the camp’s photographic unit for an official SS album put together in 1940 or 1941 for internal propaganda purposes (to show to visiting international delegations or senior figures in the SS). They are still standing and today house a permanent exhibition and a visitors’ centre run by the Ravensbrück Memorial Site.

Eight houses were arranged symmetrically in two rows around a wide square, lending a certain majesty to the group of buildings. According to the anthropologist Insa Eschebach, the arrangement and architectural style of the houses express the self-concept of the SS. They reflect the ideological frame and life world inhabited by the SS personnel (Eschebach, 1997).

Each house contained ten single-occupant studio flats on two floors, and four single attic rooms, thus accommodating up to 14 guards. The flats, measuring between 25 and 30m², contained a bedroom and living room with fitted cupboard and wash basin (Plewe and Köhler, 2001). On each floor five residents shared toilets, a bathroom, and a small kitchen. If we take into account the conditions in which most of the guards had lived with their families until then, like Braunsteiner who shared a small three-room flat with seven people, the accommodation was impressively modern and comfortable.

Their uniforms, too, played an important role in the experience of power. They were introduced in the autumn of 1940 following Himmler’s visit to the camp.
Upon arrival the new recruits each received two uniforms (summer and winter), two pairs of boots, a pair of gloves, stockings, blouses, a field cap, and sports kit.

From its inception, Nazi society was a society of uniforms. Women had worn them since they joined the work force en masse during the First World War – as postwomen, ticket inspectors, etc. The many different Nazi women’s associations – Bund DeutscherMädels (League of German Girls), NS-Frauenschaft (National-Socialist Women’s League), NS-Volkswohlfahrt (National-Socialist Welfare Agency), Reichsarbeitsdienst (Girls’ Labour Service), etc. – also all provided uniforms. But the uniform acquired a very different meaning under Nazism. It was no longer just work clothing but a sign of belonging to a community, to a political elite established according to racial criteria. The guards’ uniforms were both work clothing (garments that were practical, waterproof and durable, offering protection from cold, rain, wind and sun, and which, with their plain, severe style eliminated all sexual connotations) and uniforms in the (para)military sense of the word.

Although the status and duties of female guards were comparable to that of their male counterparts, subtle distinctions were still apparent in the dress code. Women guards did not have the right to wear the SS insignia (runes and death’s head). They had to be content with the imperial eagle, an emblem reserved for state functionaries. Nonetheless, their uniform was still charged with significant political and social meaning, for the wearer and the observer. It marked out these civilian employees as legitimate representatives of the Nazi state.

The uniform concealed individual features and character traits behind those of the group. As is shown by the photograph taken during a visit by Heinrich Himmler to Ravensbrück in 1940 or 1941 (it is impossible to establish its exact date), uniformed bodies present an image of a solid group, not only to the observers but to the guards themselves. Their wearers enjoyed a common feeling of power and belonging.

The uniform contributes to forging an esprit de corps, even though it does not exclude hierarchies of rank and frictions within the group. In her study of SS men, the political scientist Paula Diehl has clearly shown the dividing line traced between those who belong to the group and those who are excluded. This division of power also applies to the female guards (Diehl, 2005:166f.): wearing a
uniform was a profound experience for the guards, signifying membership of a community, and of sharing in the exercise of power.

The question of the aura of the uniform was never discussed by former guards. But it occupies a very important place in the memoirs of former deportees. The German Margarete Buber-Neumann, who had been a political prisoner, had the opportunity to observe a group of some twenty young women workers from an armaments factory arriving at Ravensbrück:

Even before they received their field-grey uniforms, they all came in a body to see the chief overseer. Most of them were plainly and rather poorly dressed, and stood shyly in the office, looking ill at ease and anxious; many did not know what to do with their hands. Langefeld [the chief overseer, EM] told them which houses they would live in, where to get their uniforms and when their duties would commence. Then I often observed through the window how they would walk across the main square, nudging each other and staring with terrified eyes at groups of prisoners being marched past. In some you could see a transformation as soon as they were ‘kitted out’. High leather boots already changed their manner; add a field cap cocked jauntily over one ear, and they started looking more self-confident. (Buber-Neumann, 1997: 321)

For the SS, the concentration camp was a disciplinary space. Barracks life and the uniform enabled the transformation of an assortment of unique individuals into a single homogenous group. The entrance gate marked the boundary between two worlds: that of imprisonment, the camp for the prisoners (the Schutzhaftlager); the areas for administration (Kommandantur) and production (Werkstättenand Betriebe); and then the accommodation for the SS, a more homely space while still within the enclosure of the (para)military camp. These living spaces were also subject to the internal regulation of the camp, and inside them the guards observed and supervised themselves. But these physical and mental controls over the guards operated on a very small scale. At first sight they were nothing like the sometimes brutal military methods used in male SS accommodation, in the Dachau camp for example (Broszat, 1999; Zámecnik, 2001). In this lies the ‘elegance’ of this disciplinary power over the female guards, which aims to control bodies, and which through surveillance of the self and the other acts discreetly, intensively and preventively.

Living in the camp thus meant limits and rules for the guards. But they also enjoyed certain privileges. The tasks of cooking, cleaning, washing up, ironing, were all performed by the camp prisoners, under their supervision. So the guards did not need to concern themselves with laundry or housework. Few of them would have had such luxury in their civilian lives. In 1945, during her interrogation at the Bergen-Belsen trial, Herta Ehlert described her circumstances at Ravensbrück: ‘Well, I want to be quite honest, I had never such a good life as in the beginning at Ravensbrück when I arrived’. It is quite clear that camp life, at least at the start, offered the women a degree of comfort until then unimaginable: a room of their own, regular free time, a decent salary.

The disciplinary control to which the guards were also subjected should therefore not be regarded as something purely negative – prohibition, law, restriction. Michel Foucault criticises the reduction of the concept of power to mere repression and negation, to you must not (Foucault, 2012). To understand the workings of power it is also necessary to analyse its positive and productive dynamics. Regulation of work and leisure, of housing and clothing, was not only a constraint and an obligation but also gave rights, privileges, the opportunity to identify with one’s co-workers and to exercise power over the prisoners.

It is in this sense that we can understand a letter dated 10 October 1942, sent by a former female guard to the commandant of the Majdanek camp, Sturmbannführer Max Koegel. The woman, who had previously worked at Ravensbrück, and left there in January 1942, now asks to be re-employed in a concentration camp:

You will be surprised to receive these lines from me today. After three years of service I left the women’s concentration camp of Ravensbrück on 1 January and am now in Munich as a junior clerk in the Party Directorate. Since this office post does not greatly suit me, I would like to ask you whether you might not have a position.
For the prisoners, the Ravensbrück camp was a place of suffering and death (through hunger, violence, epidemics and the systematic mass-murder of the euthanasia ‘Action 14f13’) (Strebel, 2003: 320–339); for the camp personnel, it was, until 1942, not such a bad place to work.

Daily physical violence: the micro-physics of power and violence

The ‘materialist’ approach in the previous section has examined the women’s recruitment to Ravensbrück and their acclimatisation to camp life, as well as the process of group adhesion. But how are we to comprehend concentrational violence? Observing the everyday activities of the female guards can give us a better understanding of how the concentration camp worked as an institution, but also of the cultural and social function of physical violence.

The principal task of SS personnel was to ensure the supervision and orderly management of the camp. The regulations, the frequent warnings issued by the Chief Economic and Administrative Office of the SS for the camps in Oranienburg (Wirtschaftsverwaltungshauptamt, WVHA), and messages from Heinrich Himmler himself, strictly forbade all gratuitous use of violence. Only in the case of physical assault or attempt to escape did chief overseers and guards have the right to use a firearm. On joining the SS, every man and woman had to sign a declaration on their honour not to decide on the life or death of an enemy of the state except on the orders of a superior. No National-socialist had the right to ‘raise the hand against an enemy of the state or to physically maltreat him’.

SS supervisory personnel, then, never officially had the right to use violence on prisoners, still less to kill them. Yet witnesses and evidence from the trials show that violence was frequently employed. In the Majdanek camp the most common forms were verbal abuse, slaps, blows, and kicks. Lucia Schmidt-Fels witnessed it: ‘They might hit you for little or nothing – and what with depended on their taste: with their fist, the flat of their hand, a cane or a rubber truncheon. They also kicked you – or used their dogs as their “executives” who would maltreat us with well-trained bites’ (Schmidt-Fels, 2004: 13).

The guard Hermine Braunsteiner was notorious for hitting prisoners in Ravensbrück and, later, for kicking prisoners to death in Majdanek. Let us observe this guard in an ordinary work situation, first in Ravensbrück, then in Majdanek.

Between May 1941 and October 1942, Braunsteiner was in charge of the clothing store at Ravensbrück, where she supervised a kommando of 20 prisoners. The task of these Austrian women was to redistribute clothes and shoes to other prisoners. The guard oversaw and checked the work. Clothes and shoes, vital for survival, were rare at Ravensbrück and there was often a crowd outside the store room. Viktoria Filler gave witness to the Vienna People’s Court in 1949:

When I arrived at the clothes store, the accused suddenly stepped out of it, then kicked me and I fell down. She needed space and since I was standing there, she took the opportunity to kick me. [...] The accused was generally very nervous and when she came out, she always needed space.
The guards frequently supervised prisoners performing tasks they did not know how to do themselves. We could conclude that beating prisoners was a way of compensating for their own incompetence, and of imposing a certain ‘authority’. Physical violence allowed Braunsteiner to get the upper hand, to cut a path for herself, literally and brutally, by striking blows with her hands and feet. Using violence was a way of showing that she was in charge. As a demonstration of power, violence was addressed first of all to the victim.

In the Majdanek camp, Braunsteiner hit prisoners harder and more frequently, as Janina Rawska-Bot recounted during the Majdanek Trial in Düsseldorf: ‘Twice she hit me so badly that it tore open my eyebrow and cheek’. SS personnel used all kinds of whips and sticks to beat prisoners (mainly to avoid touching them with their hands and thus risking infection). These instruments greatly increased the force of the blows and added humiliation to physical injury. Lila Givner, who arrived in Majdanek at the beginning of May 1943, described an encounter with Braunsteiner to the court in Düsseldorf in 1978:

‘Kobyla’ was tall. She kicked the prisoners and literally walked over people. ‘Kobyla’ kicked me, and I still bear the scars. That happened more than once. She walked through the barracks or the field. If someone was in her way, she lifted her foot and kicked. I met her in the field and did not manage to get out of her way in time. She kicked me so hard that I fell. As I was lying on the ground she kept kicking. While I was standing, she kicked me in my back, causing me to fall. Even then, she continued kicking me, then walked away and left me there.

Kicking took the degradation of the victims to a new level. It is a greater act of contempt than striking the face because it emphasises the asymmetry between the torturer and her victim. The victim lies prostrate on the ground, at the guard’s feet. The uniform, that is the leather boots, meant to protect the wearer against any injury or direct physical contact, is used as a weapon. The impact of a blow is much greater if administered with the foot. Braunsteiner aimed carefully and targeted the most sensitive parts of the body, like the stomach, lower abdomen and back. Her ‘boot kicks’ became her hallmark in Majdanek and earned her the nickname Kobyla, the mare.

Violence reached a climax in Majdanek: there was a clear qualitative and quantitative escalation of violent acts. How can we explain this radicalisation of behaviour? To do so, we need to explore the camp’s geopolitical context.

The decision to build a concentration camp in the Lublin district of the Polish General Government goes back to the summer of 1941. During its existence from October 1941 to July 1944, Majdanek had a number of different functions: a camp for Soviet prisoners of war; a forced labour camp for male Jews in the region; a concentration camp for male Poles from the resistance; an extermination camp for Jewish deportees, male and female (June 1942–November 1943); a concentration camp for female Poles in the resistance and Jewish women and children (October 1942–April 1944); and an internment camp for Polish and Soviet civilian hostages (mainly from the rural population) (Schwindt, 2005; Kuretsidis-Haideret al., 2011).

The arrival of the first group of women guards sent from Ravensbrück to Majdanek on 15 October 1942 coincided with the implementation of the Final Solution and the mass gassing of European Jews. Yet two-thirds of the victims at Majdanek (estimated at 78,000 people, of whom 59,000 were of Jewish origin) did not die in the gas chambers or under the bullets of mass execution squads, but as a result of the appalling sanitary conditions and of daily abuse and brutality by the guards, female and male (Kranz and Majdanka, 2005).

The women guards who had been relatively restrained at Ravensbrück became very aggressive at Majdanek. The radicalisation of their behaviour, like that of Braunsteiner, for example, can be explained by the conjunction of several factors. The transfer to Majdanek in October 1942 came as a real shock to the guards. Sanitary conditions were so bad that they were directly affecting supervisory personnel, more than in other camps. Contact with the prisoners (mainly Jews, Poles and Russians), who were in a dreadful physical state, was experienced as particularly unpleasant. For the guards, working conditions had drastically deteriorated. Organisation at Majdanek was in chaos and overcrowding was combined with staff shortage: 17 guards for every 6,000 prisoners on average. At Ravensbrück, the ratio had been 110 supervisors for 5,300 to 6,600 prisoners (Strebel, 2003: 51,
Although the female guards at Majdanek seemed to appreciate the advantages of the ‘apartheid’ society that Germany had established in occupied Poland, and the chance to appropriate property seized from Jewish deportees and stored in large quantities, we should not underestimate the discomforts, whether real (epidemics, separation from their families, harsh climate and working conditions, poor accommodation compared to Ravensbrück) or imagined (their contempt for Polish culture, and dislike of the weather; the relative proximity of the Eastern Front magnifying and demonising the figure of the enemy). All this produced feelings of deracination, frustration, fear of contamination and violent disgust for the prisoners and contributed to a radicalisation of behaviour. Relations between the female guards were often fraught, and conflicts also arose between female guards and the SS men, who were in the majority. Women were not well integrated into the SS community but some of the most experienced ones – like Hermine Braunsteiner – managed to be assertive and stand up for themselves.

The exercise of power is crucial for understanding concentrational society and in particular SS society in the camps. From a Foucauldian perspective, power ‘exists only when it is put into action’ (Foucault, 1983: 219). It does not only act directly and immediately, but also modifies the actions of individuals, whether already performed or potential, in the present or the future. Thus power is a mode of action which acts upon the actions of others. It ‘incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult’ (ibid.: 220). This concept lends itself well to the analysis of the complex relationship between SS officers, ordinary guards, and the women supervisors. But as this exercise of power depends on a degree of consent between partners, we cannot use it to analyse relationships between SS and prisoners. For these are not the result of a power relation but of a dissymmetrical relationship, where the SS has complete power over the prisoners. Following Elias Canetti’s concept of power (Canetti, 1999), we prefer the term ‘overwhelming dominance’ to describe a relationship of power characterised by a total dissymmetry between the torturer (the SS) on one side, and the victims of their extreme violence (the prisoners) on the other Foucault stresses that power does not proceed from a single instance of central power but that the exercise of power sets in play relations between individuals or groups: the SS society of the camps did not constitute a unitary body but rather, to follow Foucault, ‘the juxtaposition, the link, the coordination and also the hierarchy of different powers that nevertheless remain in their specificity’ (Foucault, 2012).

The daily perpetration of violence against the deportees of all backgrounds did not only serve – as research on the camps has claimed until now – to dominate, break and destroy the prisoners. This violence was also, and sometimes especially, addressed to the colleagues who observed – both women and men. Acts of violence also served to negotiate power relations within the SS personnel. Violence enabled the ‘moral’ codification of relationships. ‘Showing what one was capable of’ was a way of asserting oneself, of negotiating one’s status within the SS working community, and should be seen as a mode of communication among the personnel. There was no great difference between male and female SS guards in terms of the number and frequency of acts of physical violence perpetrated. But a dynamic that could be qualified as ‘gendered’ was established at Majdanek: male and female guards systematically accelerated and intensified their violent acts in the presence of a colleague of the opposite sex (Malländer Koslov, 2009: 435–350). It was a matter of ‘impressing’ and/or ‘shocking’ one’s colleagues and superiors by specific acts of violence, and of ‘proving’ one’s ‘authority’ and ‘skill’ to one’s colleagues.

Since members of the SS are linked by the totality of their actions which ‘induce others and follow from one another’ (Foucault 2012: 217), the exercise of power over others can never be definitive. It must continually be renewed, asserted, negotiated. At the level of the concentration camps, this association implies both a relation of overwhelming dominance of SS personnel vis-à-vis their detainees, but also a complex web of dependencies and interdependencies in the dynamics of power. To act outside or beyond was impossible; nobody could escape the mesh of these complex power relations. Even when female guards remained passive, or tried to ignore each other, they could not avoid seeing or meeting their fellow guards and reacting to them.

The extreme use of physical violence at Ravensbrück, Majdanek, and all the other concentration camps can largely be explained by the social relations inside the camp. Although relations between female guards and prisoners were clearly dissymmetrical, these same guards had to reassert their
authority every day, and demonstrate it – to the deportees but also to their colleagues and superiors in the hierarchy. By using physical violence, the women guards exercised power over the prisoners, and over their colleagues. Physical domination was indeed the proof of what they were ‘capable of’. Simultaneously it expressed a real thirst for power. Torturing the bodies of prisoners day after day enabled the guards to assert their place in the camp. Braunsteiner, for example, had won the confidence of the chief overseer, Ehrich, and had thus become her deputy. The vulnerable bodies of the detainees were always at the centre of a field-of-force made up of multiple links between female guards, their male colleagues and superiors, and the prisoners.

The passive guard: the constituent role of the bystander

Nevertheless, not every female guard behaved like Braunsteiner. Her colleague Herta Ehlert avoided violence. Did that make her much less violent? Margarete Buber-Neumann, a Ravensbrück deportee, described Ehlert as ‘a big blonde Valkyrie’ (Buber-Neumann, 1997: 305), fairly pleasant and friendly, sharing her food with the prisoners in her work group. Witnesses from Majdanek confirmed this impression. Danuta Medrik-Broskore members her as ‘quiet, nothing special about her, not much more to be said’. She was seen as ‘good’, ‘humane’ and ‘decent’ because she sometimes excused people from work and struck prisoners less than the other guards. Some survivor testimonies are almost positive. One can even detect a kind of ‘gratitude’, as the anthropologist Insa Eschebach has emphasised. The absence of blows certainly eased the daily lives of the starving and sick prisoners, who saw it as a privilege. Despite this apparent non-violence, there were clearly other forms of domination and humiliation (Eschebach, 1996: 46).

In Ravensbrück, Ehlert had the habit of forcing her kommando to sing her favourite song, ‘Ahoy! Ahoy!’, all day long while working (Buber-Neumann, 1997: 305). This kind of behaviour shows a form of coercion, an abuse of power by the guards, which goes unnoticed in relation to the extreme violence used by other guards.

Ehlert’s behaviour, seemingly harmless, is an act of domination: she compels ‘her’ prisoners to sing this particular song. Her ‘humane’ character becomes even more doubtful if we consider the job she had in Majdanek, where she worked in the laundry. Admittedly, she did not engage in the ‘performative’ ill-treatment carried out by her colleagues during roll-calls or on work kommandos. But her place of work was directly opposite the crematorium. So Ehlert worked at the heart of mass murder. Her chosen strategy for making her work bearable was to ignore the extermination, to pretend not to see or hear it, which was impossible since it confronted her at every instant. Ehlert took refuge in her work, silent and passive. Refusing to see was a way of sparing her conscience and keeping her job in the camp, something which can be considered, following Lüdtke, as a form of Eigen-Sinn, a rebellious, non-conformist and individualist attitude which allows the pursuit of certain individual needs and goals without questioning the political and institutional framework.

In a context of collective violence, not acting, like refusing to see, amounts to silent approval. It confirms to those women and men who do act that the fundamental rules of mutual help have ceased to apply. To understand the excesses of violence, it is crucial to consider the role of the passive bystanders who also generated violence. The social psychologist Welzer argues that the ‘active dimension of observing acts of violence’ is underestimated: ‘Through the simple fact of being present and not interfering, spectators endorse rather than challenge the frame of reference chosen by the actors’ (Welzer, 2005: 148). At the same time, brutal colleagues serve as ‘negative figures of reference’. They allow the spectators to see themselves as ‘normal’, even, by contrast, humane and compassionate. Compared to her colleague Braunsteiner, Ehlert could thus feel good about herself, completely humane. Yet she contributed just as much to the radicalisation of behaviour.

As the French anthropologist Véronique Nahoum-Grappe has shown, someone who is excessively violent, even cruel, can only exist in a situation where she feels authorised to carry out degrading and humiliating acts of violence. This context of impunity and social acceptance is an essential, but not a determining, condition of monstrous behaviour. (Nahoum-Grappe, 1996: 301, 308). This context is created by everyone. It has to be continually renewed and confirmed, as much by the direct perpetrators of this violence as by those who observe it passively. And this microsocial context automatically sets off a process of acceleration: the more one accepts, the worse one accepts. Such
a field-of-force created by the passive female guards permitted and regulated the actions of the violent ones.

**Conclusions: Violence by SS women in its microsocial context**

The microsocial approach to the history of everyday life reveals the ease with which ordinary young women recruits in the camps transformed themselves into cruel and violent guards. Of course the process was marked by some hesitations and interruptions, but there was no great gap to cross. Unlike the women guards, the men in the SS had already undergone either proper military training with the Sturmbteilung (SA, assault troops) or SS back in the 1930s (Reichardt, 2002; Buggeln, 2009), or, after 12 years of contractual service in the SS, were aiming for a career in the police (Mailänder Koslov, 2009: 126-136). The women guards came late to this concentrational universe, but adapted to it quite rapidly – precisely because at first sight the camp worked like other disciplinary spaces (above all the school and the factory) that they had known before, but with the additional features of a military framework, physical violence, and death. Once they got used to this paramilitary space, they generated violence themselves.

In the practice of violence, however, we can observe a significant difference: while the women, like the men, made free use of their leather boots to abuse the prisoners, turning their uniform into a real weapon, they rarely used firearms. Yet regulations did permit them to use their service pistols, within the limits set by the rules, in the same way as their male counterparts. This helps explain the popular saying among SS men in Majdanek, according to a female guard under interrogation: ‘When the women start shooting, it’s time to clear the camp’\(^21\). This taboo around firearms was created inside the camp by the staff who worked there. The supposed clumsiness of women with guns, invented by SS men but internalised by the female guards, reassured the men, who seemed to be alarmed by the presence of armed women in uniform inside the paramilitary space of the camp, and re-established an exclusively ‘masculine’ space in the handling of firearms.

It is also notable that women guards did not only pose a problem for their male counterparts but also for former detainees who, like the SS men, present a very gendered image of female camp guards, though obviously in an entirely different context and on another level. Statements from female and male survivors stress their shock and revulsion at female violence and cling on to examples of ‘good guards’ as if to find proof of the peaceful ‘nature’ of women. Following this logic, violent women are represented as ‘abnormal’ or ‘deviant’. While male violence is in a certain respect socially ‘acceptable’ or at least ‘explicable’, female violence remains taboo. ‘The violent woman belongs in the realm of the extraordinary, the exceptional; the woman as victim in the realm of the ordinary, the norm’–as Cécile Dauphin commented (1997: 98-99). The fact that male and female survivors remember more clearly violence performed by women, quantitatively and qualitatively, may be explained by this taboo within western societies. (Sjoberg et al., 2007; Browder, 2008). This also helps to understand why the subject of violence by women remains relatively unexplored in the historiography of Nazism. That is why it is so important to historicise this violence by anchoring it in a cultural and social context.

To understand Nazism and its thirst for destruction, it is crucial that we examine the daily lives of the SS women, the way they adapted to their work and living conditions. From this perspective, the conditions for violent actions were certainly ‘given’ by the institutional framework and the Nazi policy of destruction, but these conditions were also nuanced, altered and produced by ordinary female guards and SS men who, by reappropriating the rules, produced their social environment through their own practices (Lüdtke, 1995). Although the concentration camps were managed by centralised Berlin institutions (Concentration Camps Inspectorate, IFK, and SS Chief Economic and Administrative Office, SS-WVHA), their destructive power depended not only on the plans for extermination conceived by political leaders but also on the social and political dynamics of each camp. The orders pronounced in Berlin were put into effect, that is, modified, extended and developed, by the supervisory teams on the ground. The concentration camp was not so much a fixed, static institution as a highly dynamic arena bringing together a multitude of actors. At every level, female and male SS guards had a margin of manoeuvre in how they interpreted and enacted rules and instructions, and they frequently used it.
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1. Johanna Langefeldt, future chief overseer at Ravensbrück, then at Auschwitz-Birkenau, was first employed in a work camp for ‘anti-social’ German women, the Braumüller camp (1934–1936), before being hired as director in the Lichtenburg camp (1937–1939). She was thus a prison ‘professional’. Cf. Schwartz (2003, 2005).

2. Undated recruitment form for guards at Ravensbrück concentration camp (hereafter Ravensbrück recruitment form), Bundesarchiv (hereafter BA), NS/4/Ra 1.


4. Institut für Zeitgeschichte (hereafter IfZ) München, Schumacher Collection 1329, Fa-183.


8. Cf. ongoing research by photographic historian Ute Wrocklage (2009), who is studying visual and journalistic coverage of the camps in the German press of the time.

9. In 1943, at the start of total war and the exploitation on a massive scale of concentration camp prisoners as labourers in the armaments industry, the SS started recruiting women factory workers – sometimes by force. They were trained on site and immediately employed as guards in the SS factories or in subcamps (Strebel, 2003: 66–98).


11. Translators’ note: We have translated from the German edition throughout since the published English edition omits parts of the German text.

12. Herta Ehlert, cross-examination by Colonel Backhouse, 15.10.1945, PRO WO 235/15, p. 84.


14. Regulations of the Ravensbrück camp, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter), RG 549, 000-50-11 Box 522, Folder #3, p. 21a.

15. A central administration for all the camps, the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps IKL) was created in 1934 in Oranienburg. In 1942 the IKL was incorporated into the main economic and administrative department of the SS (WVHA) as Amtsgruppe D.

16. Regulations of the Ravensbrück camp, p. 34, cf. also p. 22f.


Vg 1 Vr 5670/48, Dokumentations archiv des österreichischen Widerstandes (hereafter DÖW), p. 9.

