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Duty, Honor, Rape: Sexual Assault Against Women During War

By Kevin Gerard Neill, MPH

War has attended the development of humankind for thousands of years. As a subject, it is studied in school. As an event, it is—for those not directly involved—a story in the newspaper, images on television, or pictures on a web page. As an aspect of culture, wars have generated literature, art and scientific discovery. Its primary contribution to our species, however, has been death and destruction. Accordingly, war is regarded by most thinking people as an evil thing, a terrible activity we inflict upon ourselves. Even the occurrence of what could be construed a “just” war (as particularly the victors generally regard World War II) denotes a breakdown of society. At the same time, it is undeniably true that wars and other armed conflicts have furnished at least some level of momentary liberation for women in certain parts of the world. Whether the costs involved in war are justified when set against the price of noninvolvement, each conflict must be examined within its own cultural and historical context: some wars quite plainly need to be fought.

Nevertheless, when wars erupt, the rules we lived by before the fight, no longer apply. The purposeful ending of lives and the devastation of property become widely accepted, either reluctantly or wholeheartedly. We must defeat the enemy, we say. We must kill. We must win. Therefore, whatever dark side there is to being human that allows us to accomplish those goals is permitted to see the light of day. We may regret an act committed in war, but it is likely to be justified in some way, as the savagery of the warrior is deemed necessary to fulfill our goal of victory. Emotions usually repressed are encouraged and violence is embraced as a needed activity. In our modern times, in fact, a soldier can be legally court-martialed for not killing.

In contrast to dutifully killing the enemy, a soldier is not supposed to rape a woman, at least in theory. But rapes occur in war. They always have, and often in settings and upon a scale that is difficult to comprehend. Accordingly, rape in times of war has a direct effect upon the society where the conflict takes place. More specifically, it affects women, and this violence against them can have the added, profoundly negative effect of eroding their particular social and environmental conditions. As difficult and emotional this issue may be, though, rape in war is in direct correlation to the study of women, their health and development. In locales where war has raged or is raging still, sexual violence against women is an individual and collective wound like no other.

An Ideology of Power

Never have I heard or read of such brutality. Rape! Rape! Rape! We estimate at least 1,000 cases a night, and many by day. In case of resistance....there is a bayonet stab or a bullet. We could write up hundreds of cases a day.

-- From the diary of an American missionary in Nanjing, China, 1937

Rape possesses a squalid history of its own, well outside the theater of war. Whatever the historical origins of the act, the evolution of human anatomy dictates that forced intercourse by male aggression is possible. And while rape is not limited to a

male's assault against a female, it does represent a virtually universal symbol of terror for the entire female gender. Viewed thusly, it is difficult to convincingly argue that the rape of a woman by a man does not embody a transhistorical and transcultural act of violent hostility.

What constitutes the deed of raping a woman beyond its physical feasibility? As a single statement, the historian Brownmiller has been expressed thusly: If a woman chooses not to have intercourse with a specific man and the man chooses to proceed against her will, that is a criminal act of rape. Forced intercourse was rape in ancient Babylon as much as it is in modern-day Baghdad-or Boston, Bangkok and Berlin. But while there have been penalties for rape as far back as that same Babylon (death by drowning) the crime was then regarded more as the lowering of a bride-price by damaging the goods or for shaming a family than for the trauma inflicted upon a woman. And while what has been called the soiling of a woman's worth by rape is still to be found in certain societies today, it should be emphasized that much of the revulsion felt toward the act has rightly shifted to sympathizing with the female victim.

Should one accept the view that rape can be seen in nearly any culture and at any time of history, it can then be debated that a patriarchal ideology of rape has subsequently developed, allowing the act to evolve into a principal weapon of power over women. This ideology particularly manifests itself during times of war, instilling rape as being a man's conquest over a woman's body, a triumph of physical strength and manhood. Taken further, this ideology has the effect of becoming a conscious process of intimidation in which men as a gender group keep women as a whole in a perpetual state of fear.¹

The formation of this ideology of rape in wartime is traceable in part through the writings of the historian Gerda Lerner. In *The Origins of Patriarchy* (1986), Lerner establishes the idea that militarism and sexual aggressiveness against women extends as far back as the earliest formation of expansionist or agricultural societies. In such societies, women were readily viewed as vital resources for the production of both food and children. Specifically, Lerner relates that this reproductive capability prompted tribes to recognize the value of acquiring more women from opposing groups to stabilize and potentially increase their population. To accomplish this acquisition, there took place the creation of a male warrior class. An additional consequence to this militarization and "theft" of women was that the conquered women were protected by the warriors or by the warriors' tribe. Thus, women came to be viewed as true property, and a perceived right of the conquering male included sexual subjugation.²

¹ The perspectives of the author evolved from several sources. As an undergraduate student at the School for International Training in Vermont, USA, I took courses in Women's Studies under a very challenging professor, Dr. Nalini Visvanathan, PhD., MPH, who was instrumental in raising my awareness of feminist theory. Also during this period, I performed fieldwork at a refugee camp in Pula, Croatia (1994). This camp (Kamenjak) held close to 1,000 refugees, mostly women and children, from Sarajevo. From 1987 until 1991, I was a medic in the Regular US Army-an interval that included close to two years in Egypt and Israel/Palestine as a member of the support battalion for an eleven- nation peacekeeping force. Prior to that assignment, I was attached to the medical platoon of an Army infantry battalion. It was all these experiences that illuminated many of my impressions about war and rape, and also led to my graduate work in international public health at the Boston University School of Public Health.

² In this case, it is not the soldier who is "rewarded", if you will, with the forced possession of a female and presented with the opportunity to rape her; rather, fathers become victims of patriarchy just as women have.

Rape, Warfare, and the Perpetuation of Male Dominance

The Germans have been in my land for a year. My...house is gone, and gone my little shop! My wife is still a young woman! My little girl-she is just a little...girl! I never thought of her as a woman! And now our priest writes me that my...wife and my...girl will have babies in two months by these brutes!

-- World War I French soldier

The soldier's quote above-including all others used-describe varying experiences and attitudes regarding rape in wars of the twentieth century. However, there are written accounts of the rape of women during conflicts dating as far back as ancient Greece. Why have these atrocities occurred beyond the motivations of our earliest ancestors?

Part of the answer may be drawn-however obscene the logic-from the fact that rape was one of the few opportunities open to the lowly soldier in previous times, who was rarely paid by his leaders. Such a reality, a "permission" to rape, defies any criminality attached to the act. Indeed, it points to a different standard of civilization being applied as our normal taboos are squelched whenever war is accepted and killing and destruction become commonplace. In this sort of world, the line between duty and cruelty is obscured, for in a wartime environment full of danger, fear and the thrill of adrenaline, the possession of women becomes the act of a conqueror. A woman-according to Lerner-represented a tangible reward.

Rape in World War II (WWII) played a similar role, but here, as in the highly-publicized, tentatively-ended wars in the former Yugoslavia, rape can also more clearly be seen as a sort of ethnic pollution, or as described by Brownmiller: a willful act of devastation and humiliation of "inferior peoples". Adherents of National Socialism (Nazism) looked upon rape as a method to further the establishment of their own, master race by damaging the ethnic purity of, say, Poles and the French. For the ordinary, apolitical Wehrmacht soldier, however, rape was more likely a seizure of the same war spoils already mentioned: plunder in the form of a woman. An identical assertion could be made concerning the estimated 100,000 to 200,000 Asian women, mostly Korean, pressed into service by the Imperial Japanese Army during WWII to become sexual slaves in army brothels.³

Nanking (now called Nanjing), China established another dark milestone during WWII as an example of the scale that the sexual abuse against women in wartime can take. The Rape of Nanking-employing the word rape to primarily describe the invasion of a geographic place-recounts the assault of that city by the Japanese in 1937. However, the

³ It is quite true that in this day and age, women in the military are also increasingly being given rifles or otherwise allowed into both formal and informal military organizations. The presence of women in all branches of the Israeli Defense Force and the recruitment of women in the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia are just two examples. It was also recently announced by the French government that women are to be allowed into the French Foreign Legion for the first time since the Legion's creation in 1831. As for the United States, women fly aircraft, command ships, and serve in units in direct support of combat forces. All are trained to fire weapons. Nevertheless, it has been my overwhelming impression and experience that most men in the military invariably view women in the military as females before regarding those women as soldiers or sailors. It is also true that women as a whole in the military still rarely see direct combat. For these reasons, I don't believe that the presence of women in any military force as they are structured today would prevent many male soldiers so disposed from seeking out women to rape in wartime settings.

metaphor obscures tales of sexual atrocities. Witnesses related stories of girls carried off by gangs of soldiers to be “horribly raped and abused”. Other practices that made the exploitation more total saw abducted women made to do laundry for military units by day and submit sexually to soldiers at night. Selected women were forced to perform sex shows, and as another, common ordeal, fathers were commanded to rape their own daughters. As a final coup de grace to rape, uncounted Chinese women were physically mutilated or beheaded. It is estimated that 20,000 women were raped during just the first month of Nanjing’s occupation.

Another modern tale of rape in wartime was the mass rape of Bengali women by Pakistani soldiers during the 1971 war in Bangladesh. Bengal, a state of 75 million people at the time and officially called East Pakistan, declared itself independent Bangladesh in 1971. Bangladesh subsequently fought West Pakistan in a rebellion lasting nine months, stopping only when Indian troops came to the support of the Bengalis. When it ended, an estimated three million people were dead and ten million more had become refugees in neighboring India. As to how many women were raped, that number is put between 200,000 and 400,000. Of these, roughly eighty percent were Bengali Moslems, while the rest were Hindus and Christians. The fact that the Pakistani soldiers were also Moslem did not prevent the rapes from taking place. Despite a shared religion, the tall, lighter-skinned Punjabi Pakistanis are racially different from the darker, smaller Bengalis. This racial difference added to the shame and suffering of Bengali women who became pregnant after being raped, for it was made known in Bangladesh after the war that the Bengali women and the children they bore with Punjabi features would never be accepted back into Bengali culture. This was the attitude of numerous fathers, husbands, prospective bridegrooms and others, despite efforts by the government to have raped women declared national heroines as a way of reintegrating them into society. However, with most women living a life of purdah, or strictly-enforced, veiled isolation, measures like these had little success if a Bengali man believed such women were contaminated. The search for a solution by desperate women led to incidents of infanticide and suicide. Abortions were also widespread, writes Brownmiller, and the women who effectuated the termination of their pregnancy are numbered in the thousands.

When it comes to the American soldier, there is no immunity from guilt. Rape has been a steady activity of the American military, and perhaps nowhere else could it be better examined than through the American experience in Vietnam.

For twenty years, the American armed forces were involved in Vietnam, first covertly and then openly. The moral dilemma posed by war there as the years passed, the purposeful conscription of urban poor into the ranks, the changing American cultural landscape—these were some of the things that contributed to the sexual exploitation and abuse of Asian women by the American military. The charge that U.S. servicemen committed rape is unquestionable. From the individual rape of barroom girls in Saigon to the mass rape and murder of dozens of civilian women in the village of My Lai, the Criminal Investigative Division of the United States Army is rife with documentation concerning abuses by Americans. Beyond the brutality of rape, however, was the American military’s involvement in the commercial sex business. In order to maintain soldiers’ morale in fighting an unpopular war, the Pentagon knowingly allowed the formation of brothels on base camps throughout Vietnam. Military authorities also organized thinly veiled “sex tours” for Army troops, sailors, airmen and Marines on leave

in Thailand, the Philippines, Taiwan and other locales. The camp brothel or otherwise providing women to soldiers hardly began in this war, but Brownmiller wrote that it merits special note here for the official commitment to the idea that a soldier needs and deserves a woman for sexual gratification to get him to continue fighting and killing.

Further Implications of Rape in Wartime

I then told him that, in spite of my most diligent efforts, there would unquestionably be some raping, and that I should like to have the details as early as possible so that the offenders could be properly hanged.

-- General George S. Patton, Jr. War as I Knew It

....flying over a rice paddy, Ridenhour and his pilot sighted a body in the field below. The pilot propelled their (helicopter) downward for a closer look. "It was a woman," Ridenhour later said with emotion. "She was spread-eagled, as if on display. She had an 11th Brigade patch between her legs-as if it were some type of display, some badge of honor."

-- Testimony from door gunner Ronald L. Ridenhour during the My Lai investigation (Vietnam War)

Like any rifle or shell, rape in war assumes the level of being a weapon. It serves a specific military purpose. Putting aside for a moment the unforgivable defiling of an individual woman, rape in war achieves the goal of demoralizing and intimidating the side of the victim. It wounds identity and pride. And, in a traditional society, rape will likely be internalized by the victim, her family and, in the end, by the community in which she lives. In this manner, raping the women of a defeated people or nation becomes part of the effort to destroy them.

Beyond the use of rape as a weapon of war, a larger question would be to ask how each rape exploits women, for asking it sets in motion an examination of the culture of abuse. When men are set apart from women and issued a rifle, as in war, are women abused sexually because they are representatives of the enemy, or-questions Brownmiller-because women are specifically women and therefore the enemy? As such, sexual aggression becomes an instrument of contempt against women and not necessarily a part of the activity of war.

To pose this concept offers another view over how and why masculinity is militarized, as rape in war can also be seen as one of the worst manifestations of patriarchy. As a process perpetuating male dominance, then, it works extremely well. Left unanswered is the ultimate motive of this sort of rape, plus the source of the motive. Is rape in war the result of a conscious command policy of intimidation? Is the act an example of men out of control or of men under control? If the latter is the case, then the next question is to identify the target of this intimidation. Would the targets be the women themselves, or-according to Brownmiller-the victims' husbands, sons and fathers?

Of course, rape in war could work toward both ends, for the act not only harms women, it disgraces the men who were unable to protect them-at least in the view of the patriarchal rapist. Another target of intimidation might be the soldier himself. Soldiering

is considered by many to be the ideal expression of manhood. To have leaders encourage their male soldiers to rape women enables those same soldiers to socialize themselves into a group brutality, allowing them to sever ties from normal society so they can get on with the business of killing.

A Return to the Balkans: Rape and Its Aftermath

We have orders to rape the girls.

-- Mirsada, a young Bosnian Muslim woman, relating the words of the Serbian soldier who abducted her from her village in 1992

Never. I will never give birth.

-- Marianna, a non-Muslim Bosnian woman, speaking from Croatia and seeking an abortion after becoming pregnant as a result of being raped for 24 hours in a Serbian-controlled camp.

The backdrop of the Balkans provides one of the most contemporary and publicized examples of the mass perpetration of rape. Thus, that setting becomes a useful prism to further study the uses and effect of rape in wartime.

Significantly, while documentation exists accusing all sides of having committed sexual atrocities, Muslim women appear to have been the primary victims and the chief perpetrators were believed to be Serbian soldiers. ⁷ Moreover, there exists compelling evidence that the raping of women pursued a systematic plan of ethnic cleansing—the process of evacuating or forcing out certain ethnic groups from geographic areas—by instigating a form of ethnic pollution. To quote Mark Wheeler, a lecturer on Balkan history at the University of London: “The idea of nationality in the former Yugoslavia is based on descent, and the greatest debasement is to pollute a person’s descent.”

How is it done, then? How is ethnic pollution achieved using the bodies of women? In the Balkans, rape certainly appears to have been used as a method of bringing shame and destruction to Muslim families. Eyewitness accounts mention instances where women were detained in what have been called “rape camps” and raped repeatedly until they became pregnant. These women were released only when it was too late for an abortion. As pointed out by Granjon and Deloche, this forced them to bear children of mixed ethnicity, thereby acquiring the aim of ethnic pollution.

How else did rape in this war affect women? Was it somehow unique? Unlike most wars, where soldiers and the women they rape are strangers because of geographic or social separation prior to war, abundant testimonies of women raped in this series of conflicts revealed that many women knew the men who raped them, either by name or personally. This addition to the personal shock inherent in the act of rape itself multiplies a woman’s psychological burden, particularly along with the accompanying experience of war. For example, if rape is heaped onto a list of wartime trauma that might encompass the death of loved ones, loss of home and community, untreated illness or war-related injury, how severe and long-lasting will a woman’s psychological problems be? Sexual abuse mingled with the violence and deprivation experienced amidst war would likely exacerbate the effects of what can already occur after any rape: intense shock, a paralyzing fear of injury or death, and a sense of loss of control over one’s life. The

anxiety of living in a war-torn environment would also likely compound a woman's longer-term problems associated with rape. These include persistent fears, avoidance of situations that trigger memories of the rape, feelings of shame, memory loss, inability to respond to life generally and difficulty reestablishing intimate relationships. As for the physical effect of rape, an unwanted pregnancy is only one dilemma, though the complications for a victim will vary enormously depending upon her age and whether any other bodily abuse, such as wounds, beating or mutilation has also occurred. Contracting sexually transmitted diseases, including the human immuno-deficiency virus (HIV) is also a danger.

Beyond the individual victim, rape in war may also have traumatic social repercussions, especially relating to cultural and community bonds. One example was the desire of many raped Muslim women who became pregnant to have abortions, despite its condemnation by their Muslim community. The status of women in the Balkans deteriorated further as a result, especially when mixed with any accusations over loss of sexual purity that a community or culture assesses against a rape victim. Such a loss seems exactly the case in many instances for Muslim women who were raped in the Balkan Wars. As Brownmiller pointed out a generation before, this shows just how effective rape can be as a weapon: rape destroys life, it creates unwanted life, it causes catastrophe for communities, strains cultures and religious beliefs, and it reaffirms the vulnerability of women toward men.

In response to the widespread rapes and other sexual crimes in the Balkans, the UN Security Council established, in 1993, an International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) to seize and prosecute individuals responsible for those actions. However, it wasn't until July of 2000 that the ICTY upheld a ruling that established rape as a war crime. In this case, the ICTY rejected the appeal of a Bosnian Croat officer who was convicted in 1998 of standing by while a subordinate tortured and raped a female prisoner. In a move called significant, the conviction set two international legal precedents: The ICTY admitted the testimony of the victim, and extended the meaning of sexual assault to be more straightforwardly punishable as an act of torture.

While this ruling marks a turning point for women, it represents only an incremental step toward enhancing their international legal status. ¹ It is conceivable, however, that the conviction could lead to more international attention given other forms of aggression against women, like domestic violence and prostitution. Such moves will probably be very slow in coming, though, for any action questions both the established power of patriarchy and the concept of the family. The "family" is currently regarded in international law as the basic unit of the sovereign nation-state. Tampering with the family-its structure and power-would conflict with governments' constant refusal to accept the jurisdiction of the United Nations in related areas, as it is considered a meddling in internal affairs. As for patriarchy, nationalist men might conceivably resist a true elevation of women's international legal status because it would disallow those same men the opportunity to turn the wartime rape of "our women" into a propaganda tool to justify the militarization of masculinity. A change in international law would also deny those and other men future opportunities to impose additional restrictions on women under the guise of ensuring women's safety.

In the face of this relatively negative stance concerning women's current overall status, it is nevertheless true that many important strides have been made to improve the

position of women, particularly toward the end of the twentieth century. From the establishment of the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985) to the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995, there has been an increased focus on issues pertaining to girls and women on a global scale. However, it seems far too many proclamations, legal provisions, development program initiatives and the like do not filter down as practical enlightenment or assistance to untold females in scores of countries. For girls and women trapped in conflicts in Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Lebanon, Chechnya, or any other war zone, there will likely be no significant lessening of the danger of being raped because of any court proceedings in The Hague.

Despite the urgency to do more to protect women who face the possibility of being raped in war, the immediate needs of girls and women who have already become victims remains, for they may have chronic medical and psychological conditions as the legacy of their rape. However, it is critical to address any treatment within the victim's cultural context. What this means is that a far greater understanding is required by those providing care to be aware of how a woman's cultural setting allows her-or doesn't allow her-to emerge from the experience of rape.

Conclusion

It is almost impossible to imagine that rape in war will cease. As long as organized killing continues, so too will the rape of innocent girls and women. Obviously, then, a priority would be to labor toward ending wars as they flare-a thought more easily expressed than accomplished. An equal priority, though, should be given to making ourselves far more aware of what rape in war actually means. Rape within this historic arena is much more serious and evil than what Josef Stalin believed when he described to a biographer the thousands of rapes committed by Soviet troops in WWII as a "trifle".

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