

Freudenstadt – The violence of an occupation

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Freudenstadt, a symbol of the French troops' brutality?

At the end of winter 1944/45, the war was definitively lost by the "Third Reich", and the Allies were preparing for the military conquest of Germany. In March 1945, on the Western front, the US army entered through the Palatinate and progressed towards Speyer. The French troops crossed the Rhine on 31 March and then advanced rapidly, taking Karlsruhe without any major battles in early April. Operations continued in Württemberg, in Baden and in the Black Forest, until they reached the former German-Austrian border on 29 April.

The French troops' passage through Freudenstadt, a small spa town of about 10 000 souls located at the heart of the Black Forest, left a deep impression on the minds of the locals. On 16 April 1945, low-altitude airstrikes using incendiary bombs, as well as shelling that was aimed at the town for hours, started a huge blaze that it was long impossible to control. The town centre was nearly entirely destroyed, with some 1 400 families becoming homeless. In the three days following the capture of the town, the troops ruled over it with violence. People were arbitrarily shot dead, hundreds of women were raped. In the collective memory, the French troops' behaviour in Freudenstadt was an illustration of their brutality.

The eyewitness account of a gynaecologist

Dr Renate Lutz-Lebsanft, aged 27 at the time, had been practicing as an intern for two years in the obstetrics and gynaecology service of the hospital of Freudenstadt when the French troops arrived. In an interview granted in 1993, she remembers that from the very first night, women were coming to the hospital after being raped. According to her, every day a hundred women would then appear at the hospital – around 600 in total – to which must also be added those who did not seek any medical attention because they were ashamed.

Once they arrived at the hospital, the women were given an enema which aimed to prevent sexually transmitted infections such as syphilis. The women were instructed to return six weeks later, after the necessary time had elapsed to assess whether an infection had taken place. Not all of them returned, but those who did and found that they had become pregnant as a result of the rape they had suffered also received support from the service's staff. Dr Lutz-Lebsanft provided abortions for the women who did not wish to keep the child, always assisted by two midwives who made sure the procedure was properly carried out. She was clear: there was no one in her service at the time who would have disputed this abortion practice.

Medical professionals faced legal uncertainty at the time, not knowing which laws applied or would apply to them. But for Dr Lutz-Lebsanft, there was no question: these women in distress had to be helped. While the Catholic Church forbade abortion in all circumstances, the Protestant Church, which was much more present in Freudenstadt, was more understanding and permitted abortions in certain cases.

Children of the enemy

Once the Allied occupation was established, abortions were subject to the authorisation of the military authorities. In the French occupation zone, the processing delays were such that by the time the authorisation was finally granted, doctors often refused to perform the abortion due to the exceedingly advanced stage of the pregnancy. Desperate, some of the women resorted to illegal abortions, with considerable legal and sanitary risks, while others took their own lives.

A certain number of babies conceived through these rapes were abandoned by their mothers and offered up for adoption in France, which was in demand. Many of them grew up with their mothers, feeling more or less vaguely that they weren't a family member like the others. The children born of a rape committed by a member of the occupying forces were a living reminder of the act of violence experienced by their mother. In the eyes of their family, their parish or their village, of the entire community, they were the "children of the enemy" and suffered exclusion in various forms. This was especially the case for the children of the French troops' so-called colonised soldiers, whose skin colour or facial features gave away their origins. Today, Franco-German associations help these "children of the occupation" to trace their parents, providing very precious support to these men and women in search of their roots.

Further reading

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