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## **'All one could desire' British women remember life in post war Germany**

My PhD thesis attempts to fill a gap in the historiography of the British occupation of Germany which took place 1945-1949. Garnering evidence in the form of both written and oral testimonies from the lives of 'ordinary' women living and working in an occupied country and mapping this onto meanings of gender, identity and power is at the heart of my thesis. Women's memories of their time in Germany adds lived experience to the interpretations and convictions found in other sources.

Juila Swindells writing in *Women's History Review* maintains that – 'women's history has often looked for a place outside of texts – that which is documented in conventional form to orality to supply us with what is hidden from history or misrepresented in texts.'<sup>1</sup> Swindell's assertion that women are hidden from history echoes Sheila Rowbotham who made the same claim in her book 'Hidden from History' in 1973.<sup>2</sup> Years later I discovered this to be true of the occupation period regarding the British Zone of Germany. Much has been written about the role of women role during the Second World War and my research correlates to the work of Penny Summerfield who during the 1990's interviewed women about their memories of war work during the 1990's.<sup>3</sup> The use of personal testimonies or 'women speaking for themselves' as Penny Summerfield puts it, is an area fraught with theoretical difficulties. Joan Wallach Scott and Denise Riley both question the authenticity of women's voices but Penny Summerfield argues that how women mediate public discourses, of which there are several, is worth investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> J.Swindells 'Coming Home to Heaven: manpower and myth in 1944 Britain' *Women's History Review*, Vol 4, 2, (1995) pp 223- 235

<sup>2</sup> S.Rowbotham '*Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against it*' (London, Pluto, 1973)

<sup>3</sup> P.Summerfield '*Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and subjectivity in oral histories of the Second World War*' (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998)

For my own part the inter-relatedness of gender, race and class is apparent in women's narratives so that the very recovery of women's voices is contingent with examining how women positioned themselves in relation to others, both British and German, in the context of their daily lives in Germany. Presenting the voices of British women in this way – that is in relation to other viewpoints - I hope to avoid fragmenting the history of the occupation period into what Jane Haggis refers to as 'a series of parallel tracks'.<sup>4</sup> One theme I am currently working on is the idea that the meanings of everyday life in the British Zone augmented a 'victor identity' and required exhibitions of 'Britishness' from staff without actually being characterised by what Sian Nicholas 'describes as 'imperialistic triumphalism'.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, I am not attempting to unravel Britishness but to try and pinpoint what it meant to be British in the peculiar historical period that was occupied Germany. Susan Lawrence ratifies this stating that the term 'British is historically contingent' as well as being 'situationally defined'.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, readings of this must take into account multiple voices and positions – there is no singular expression of 'belonging' to the nation – this paper about establishing subjective experience rather than one undisputable truth.

Built into women's experiences in Germany is the fact that Germany had been at war with Britain for six years and that women's presence in Germany was part of a wider initiative to transform German society. By accentuating the notion of fair play 'we are a forgiving people', the British authorities endorsed a single public culture -shared characteristics which would be deployed in Germany by all British personnel.

Invoked by Sir William Strang, political adviser to Commander in Chief, F M

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid p 49

<sup>5</sup> S. Nicholas in R. Weight and A. Beach 'The Right to Belong: Citizenship and National Identity in Britain, 1930-1960' (London, Tauris, 1998) p 40

<sup>6</sup> S. Lawrence in S. Lawrence (ed) 'Archaeologies of the British: Explorations of identity in Great Britain and its colonies 1600-1945' (London, Routledge, 2003) p 1-2

Montgomery, 'by assuming supreme authority in Germany we cannot escape from our own traditions, national character and ways of life.'<sup>7</sup>

So how did these characteristics find expression on a daily basis? Couple of examples from women working in Germany shortly after commencement of occupation period illustrate how relying on a definitive reading of British behaviour is problematic. Ursula Fookes -NAAFI manager—remembered 'it was wonderful to see the Union Jack and not the Nazi swastika. The whole time I was in Germany it gave me a thrill whenever I saw our flag.'<sup>8</sup> Whereas Mrs Morris, a nurse, recorded in her diary 'we must believe that this war was fought and won to preserve decency and humanity. We all feel a sense of righteous indignation about the cruelty and sadism of Belsen and Buchenwald but it looks as if we have our war criminals.'<sup>9</sup> Initially, her job entailed taking care of German POW's who had been detained by the British. Unlike Ursula Fookes, Mrs Morris does not immediately identify with imagined British values such as good manners as she is appalled by the condition of the German soldiers who were suffering from starvation and dysentery and smelling so badly that she was compelled to wear a double face mask. Mrs Morris challenges the notion that being British is universally equated with fair play and decency by questioning the treatment of the German soldiers in her care. She detaches herself from an honorable identity; an identity assumed by Ursula Fookes and to a lesser extent by Pam Warren whom I will come to later, as this has been transgressed by the actions she witnessed.

Examining women's narratives in the contextual framework of victory exposes a complex and diverse reaction to the authority this conferred. The rehabilitation of Germany is rarely alluded to explicitly in women's testimonies instead, women

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<sup>7</sup> M.E. Pelly and H.J. Yasamee (eds) *Documents on British Policy Overseas, Series I, Volume V* (London, HMSO, 1990) p 43

<sup>8</sup> Papers of Ursula Fookes IWM 94/27/11

<sup>9</sup> Diary of Mrs Morris IWM 80/38/1

position themselves in a variety of ways in relation to their role as occupiers.

Women's description of the reality of their life in Germany does not always fit into the established notion of how a victorious Briton should think and behave and not all women embraced the role of victor. Pam Warren, a WAAF, presents a subdued picture of herself as a conqueror entering the town of Buckeburg.

*We had been enemies of the Germans for six long years. We now had no feeling of enmity towards them, but had no way of knowing how they would feel towards us.*

*We had come straight from Belgium – a liberated country whose people had welcomed us with open arms, regarding the Allies as heaven- sent deliverers. Now the position was totally reversed. We were the representatives of the same R.A.F.*

*which had been greatly involved in the total destruction of scores of German towns and cities. The Germans had every reason to hate our guts.<sup>10</sup>*

Pam Warren is almost apologetic for her presence in Germany and shows empathy with the defeated people she has come to instruct and reform. As a W.A.A.F Pam Warren understood that her task in Germany was allied to the dismantling of the Luftwaffe yet she is able to step out of her designated role as a defender of democracy and see herself through German eyes as a possible aggressor. Pam Warren's public role in Germany is eclipsed in her memoirs by her private concerns about how the German people will view her. In a later passage she tellingly equates her tolerance with a pragmatism borne out of national characteristics 'with our peculiar brand of British logic our waiters were simply foreign waiters...the fact that they were Germans seemed to make no difference at all.'

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<sup>10</sup> P.Warren '*Best of Enemies*' (London, Howard Baker, 1986) p40

By considering the after effects of war on the human condition, Mrs Morris and Pam Warren's recollections take a reflexive turn and avoid the simplistic, albeit understandable, approach of recognizing the occupation to be a natural offshoot of the Allied victory. Mrs Morris's unease at her privileged position in Germany is well illustrated by the following comments on learning she will be on leave over Victory weekend in June 1946 'it will probably be a most interesting and spectacular scene but I feel in view of the sad state of chaos and shortages in Germany and England that the whole thing might be rather ostentatious and distasteful.'<sup>11</sup>

The recognition of the need for a specific social life along national lines also features prominently in women's memories. According to Michael Balfour, managing such a social life depended on where one was situated and this is confirmed through the examination of official reports.<sup>12</sup> Miss Crawford was assigned the task of reporting on amenities for women across the British Zone and providing an adequate social life for young women was evidently problematic, 'there are few social amenities for the girls and their social life consists of occasional parties either at their own mess at the Sergeants' mess.'<sup>13</sup> A gendered social life is also evidenced by Pam Warren describing the significance of beer for the British in Germany.

*Although it seemed that we had been provided with all the amenities one could desire, there still remained a very important item without which no Briton could really feel at home. This was his pint of beer.<sup>14</sup>*

For her, life in Germany although comfortable, in that it offered 'all one could desire' was lacking in substance as in order to replicate home beer was required. Beer is

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<sup>11</sup> Diary of Mrs Morris IWM 80/38/1

<sup>12</sup> M.Balfour 'Four Power Control in Germany and Austria 1945-1946' (London, OUP, 1956) p109

<sup>13</sup> FO 1068/69

<sup>14</sup> Ibid p 78

emblematic of Britain but is also a man's drink – Pam's social life is constituted separately from that of her male colleagues. Women's social requirements centred on dancing and creative pursuits whereas for the men, beer was the pivotal element in the quest for social contentment.

Women were also marked out by their work in Germany – as during WW2 both men and women were serving the nation in Germany but their tasks and how these were perceived were shaped by traditional gender roles. Ursula Fookes ran a mobile canteen for the NAAFI and observed, 'at that time men running Germany were the same men who had fought to get there and had a wonderful sense of goodness of their mission. They were eager to make Germany into a decent country.'<sup>15</sup> Ursula saw it as essentially a man's job to rebuild Germany. Running parallel to this is how she was divested of her sexuality, 'treated like one of the boys.' Penny Summerfield refers to this as a 'degendered sense of belonging' – women in services no longer defined in conventional terms.<sup>16</sup> She contests that this process promoted group solidarity – de sexed women were not a threat - division of loyalty amongst the men as well as a distraction. This was not a static position – as I have noted gender difference was maintained with regards to social mores and Ursula Fookes remembers other women who openly fraternised with the men whilst on duty. 'The two girls we were replacing had done precious little work. They sold supplies to the Sergeant's mess and had not visited the men at all. This is against the idea of the NAAFI . They spent the rest of the day having lunch and paying social calls to the officers'<sup>17</sup>,

Wives were embraced as 'team members' in addition to their traditional supportive role as wives to husbands in the services. They had to conform as homemakers

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<sup>15</sup> Papers of Ursula Fookes IWM 94/27/11

<sup>16</sup> P.Summerfield ' *Reconstructing Women's Lives*' p 136

<sup>17</sup> Papers of Ursula Fookes IWM 94/27/11

being called on to perform domestic duties for their husbands but as representatives of the nation to they had public obligations to the Military Government by impressing on the Germans the advantages of political emancipation. Screening individual wives in their homes to ensure total compliance would have been an extreme measure; wives were encouraged by those in power to operate as a delegation of conscientious 'Englishwomen' but individual responses did emerge. Mrs Marley was one of the first wives to enter Germany as one of the advance party. For her travelling to Germany was not principally associated with the replacement of tyranny by democracy but instead became synonymous with the resumption of family life.

*I was so happy to be with my husband for one thing because we had been apart for 5 years... We had been apart for so long and we were quite happy just to be on our own and it was a lovely area Kronshagen.<sup>18</sup>*

Mrs Marley's recollections of her experience in Germany revolve round her role as provider for her husband as well as her 'adopted' German family. British families lived in requisitioned houses; houses were acquired for service personnel by ejecting German families who were then housed in substitute accommodation.<sup>19</sup> Mrs Marley and her husband disregarded policy by inviting the German family whose house they took over to remain. By framing Mrs Marley's testimony in the context of public discourses surrounding the occupation, especially the negative profiling of Germans, it is possible to identify incongruent voices. )

To conclude the daily lives of the British in Germany are a rich vein for exploring how British identity was understood in a particular historical moment and setting.

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Mrs Marley April 2004

<sup>19</sup> P. Meehan 'A Strange Enemy People: Germans Under the British 1945-1950' (London, Peter Owen, 2001) p137



The materiality of being British in Germany was not experienced in the same way by everyone rather the point to be made here is to show how the British articulated specific cultural practices both in public arenas, like the beer garden, as well as on a personal level.