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Gender and the Holocaust

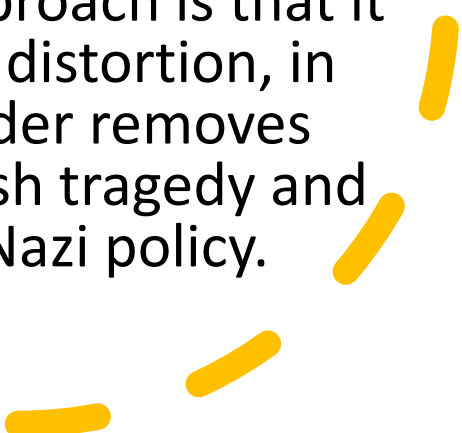


Introduction

- How did the subject of gender come to be discussed and analysed by historians?
- In order to find the answer to this, we need to consider the development of the historiography of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust; and also of developments in other fields like women's studies, which became popular in the 1980s.
- Initially there was some hostility to a gendered approach to the study of the Holocaust, by writers who claimed that it detracted attention from the horrors of the Holocaust as a whole, or alleged that writers of women's history had a particular agenda and were consciousness-raising on a specific issue.

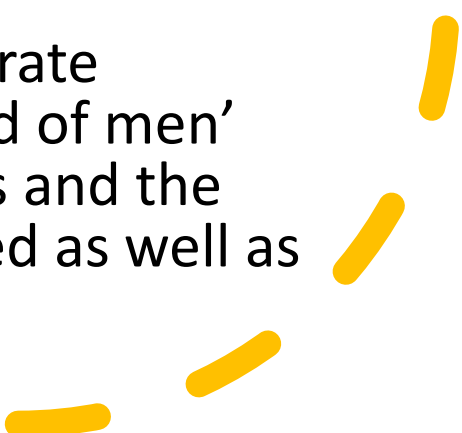
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Arguments against a gendered approach

- Lawrence Langer and Gabriel Schoenfeld have argued against a gendered approach.
 - One of the main doubts about a gendered approach to the study of the Holocaust has been that a differentiation of the victims by gender detracts from the fact that all Jews – men, women and children – were equally destined for murder by the Nazi regime.
 - Langer argues that gendered behaviour played a greatly reduced role during the Holocaust and argues against creating what he terms a ‘mythology of comparative endurance’.
 - Another concern about a gendered approach is that it may lead to historical trivialisation and distortion, in particular, a fear that emphasis on gender removes attention from the Holocaust as a Jewish tragedy and deflects attention from the horrors of Nazi policy.
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A gendered approach

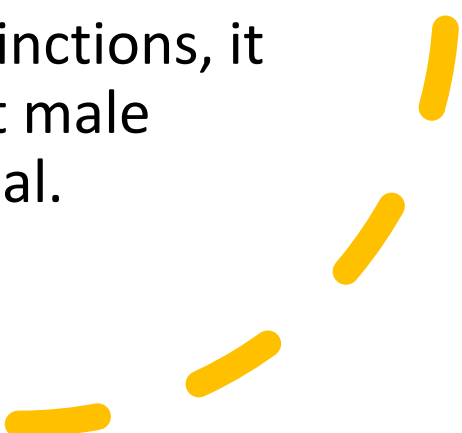
- Nevertheless, a gendered approach has now become a mainstream part of the history of the Holocaust.
 - Yehuda Bauer has suggested that ‘the problems facing women as women and men as men have a special poignancy in an extreme situation such as the Holocaust’.
 - Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman emphasise that rather than distracting us from the Nazi brutality against all Jews, a gendered approach enhances our understanding of it ‘by locating it in the specificity of individual experiences’.
 - As Myrna Goldenberg suggests, a separate examination of ‘the lives of women and of men’ allows us ‘to determine the differences and the similarities in the way they were treated as well as the way they responded’.
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Historiographical Developments

- The historical literature on women and the Holocaust has developed considerably since the pioneering articles by Sybil Milton and Joan Ringelheim published in the 1980s.
- It has examined a wide range of previously un-researched topics and treated a diversity of Holocaust experiences.
- Since the 1990s, an increase in the publication of survivor narratives written by both men and women has also contributed to our greater understanding of the Holocaust.
- These developments in the historiography have meant that scholars are now in a much better position to comprehend the range and complexity of the experiences of Holocaust victims.



Women's and Men's Voices

- Representations of women's experiences, in particular, have offered significant new insights and engendered a deeper knowledge of this important and difficult subject.
 - Previously, based on male survivor testimony, a universal view of Holocaust experiences was the norm, with female voices unheard.
 - This has changed considerably since the late 1990s, as more female survivor testimonies have been published.
 - As we try to understand gendered distinctions, it is also necessary to take a fresh look at male testimony as male, rather than universal.
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Conditions at Auschwitz

Circumstances of internment at Auschwitz included:

- thirst and hunger
 - extremes of temperature
 - arduous physical labour
 - overcrowding
 - lengthy roll calls
 - exhaustion
 - illness and disease
 - injury and beatings
 - constant fear of 'selection' for the gas chambers
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The experiences of women

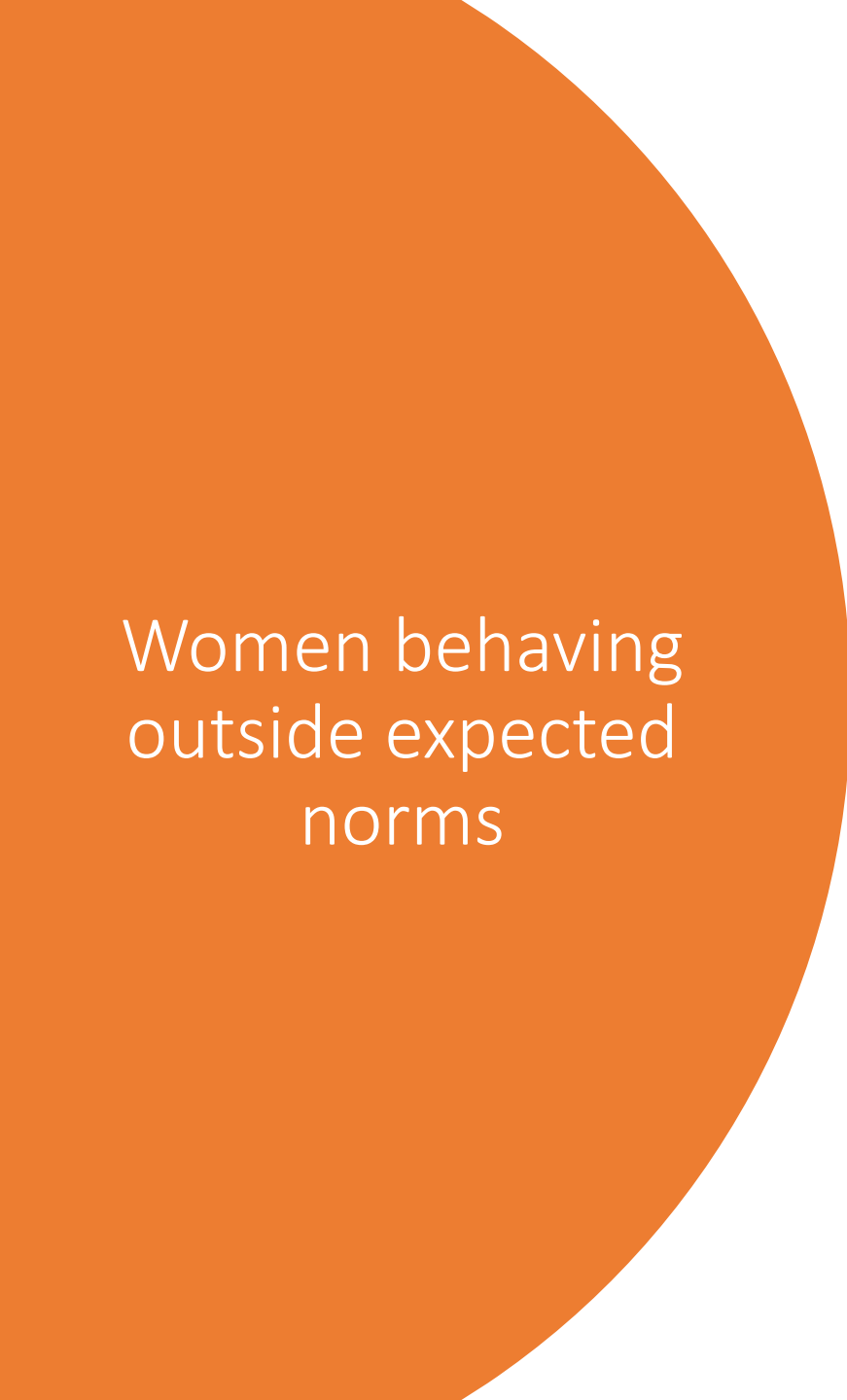
Women had to deal with a number of problems that affected them specifically as women. These included issues related to:

- arrival rituals
 - physical appearance
 - menstruation
 - violence and sexual abuse
 - pregnancy and childbirth
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Adapting and coping mechanisms

- Resourcefulness, homemaking skills and cleaning in order to establish control over themselves and their space.
 - Exchanging recipes, kitchen memories, reciting poetry, playing games and memories of home.
 - Formation of ersatz or substitute families and bonding with other inmates.
 - Sharing of food.
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Women behaving
outside expected
norms

Margit Raab Kalina recalls starving inmates at
Auschwitz:

'They fight over pieces of bread or steal from each other. In front of the kitchen I see women fighting to get hold of the garbage cans and eat the garbage. Like animals, I think, and at that moment I make a pledge never to let myself lose my human dignity, no matter how much I might suffer.'



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Women behaving outside expected norms

- Liana Millu describes how physical hardship and deprivation produced competitive, self-interested behaviour – women who were ‘ready to pummel and trample over the others in order to get in first and grab a good place’.
 - Olga Lengyel relates how women, ‘who formerly would not have taken a hairpin, became utterly hardened thieves and never suffered the slightest feeling of remorse’.
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Sexual favours

- Survivor narratives refer to the granting of sexual favours by some girls and women in exchange for food, other items or 'camp luxuries'.
 - Some women adopted the survival strategy of flirting, bantering or 'acting coy' with men and performing sexual favours, as a way of gaining extra food or 'luxuries'.
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Prostitution

- The impact of the existence of the *Puffkommando* (brothel) on different women was significant.
- There was a marked difference of attitude between those women inside the brothel and those outside.
- On one level, there was the moral stance of rejection of a woman for prostituting herself, yet at the same time, there was some jealousy and resentment about the 'luxuries' that life in the brothel afforded.

Pregnancy and birth

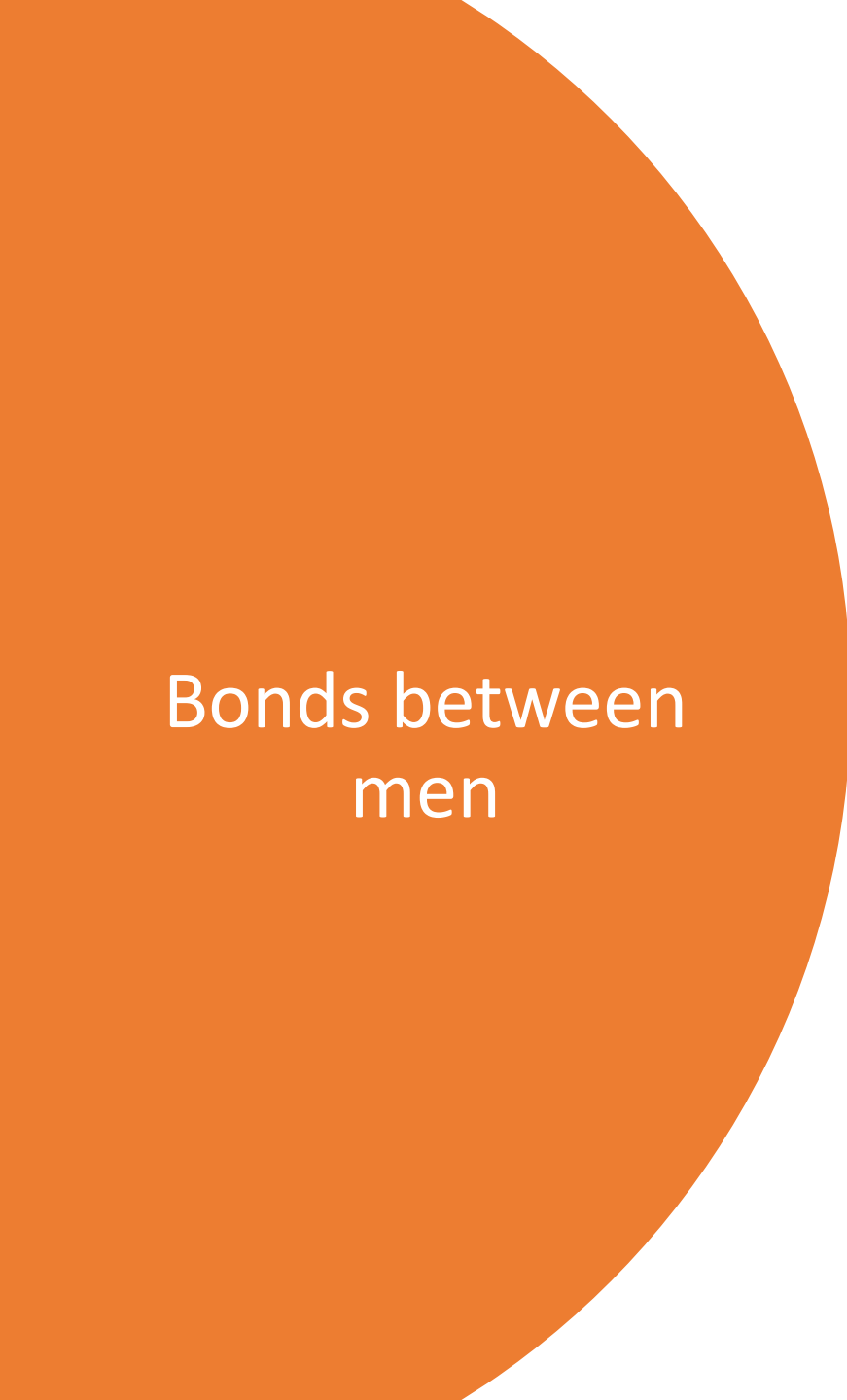
- At the infirmary at Auschwitz, as soon as a baby was born, both mother and infant were sent to the gas chambers.
- In order to save the lives of the mothers, Olga Lengyel describes how newborn infants were killed: 'And so, the Germans succeeded in making murderers of us.... The only meager consolation is that by these murders we saved the mothers'.
- Gisella Perl, a Jewish doctor from Hungary, interned in Auschwitz, also recounts: 'It was up to me to save the life of the mothers, if there was no other way, than by destroying the life of their unborn children'.

Male Testimonies

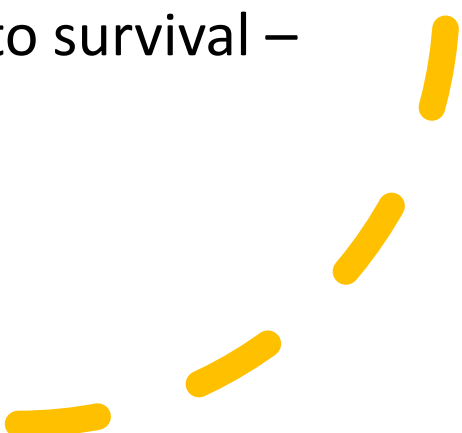
- The expected gendered norm for male behaviour was independence and strength – not weakness or dependence on others.
- Lagerway notes that ‘male survivors framed their narratives in order and coherence, and often de-emphasised emotions’.
- Male testimonies have tended to emphasise examples of individual valour, strength or autonomy.
- Dutch survivor, Loius de Wijze, underlined the need for care of the self in his memoirs as well: ‘Everyone lives for himself. Our one and all-encompassing credo is: Survive! Between the outer limits of life and death, previous values and norms lose their meaning, and our spiritual baggage gradually erodes. The only norm that counts is “I”.’

Male Testimonies

- Signs of weakness fell short of normative behaviour for men.
- Viktor Frankl states that 'it was necessary... to keep moments of weakness and furtive tears to a minimum'.
- Men did not wish to appear cowardly or weak. As a result of different social constructions of gender, men were less likely to discuss emotions, admit to weakness or the need for another person with whom to share their burden.
- Pride in work and its impact on their identities is much more common in male writings.
- By contrast, female accounts have tended to be much less specific on work and how it was conducted.
- This suggests that work was more central to men's experiences in line with contemporaneous gendered norms.



Bonds between men

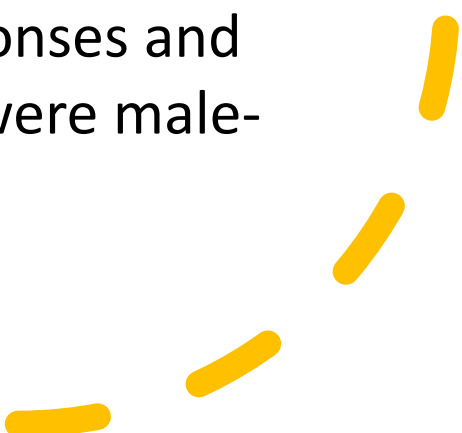
- Yet if we look for them, we can find examples of men engaged in bonding behaviour that we may more easily associate with women's behaviour in line with expected gender norms.
 - Primo Levi tells of his friend Lorenzo: 'Lorenzo was a man; his humanity was pure and uncontaminated, he was outside this world of negation. Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man.'
 - Importance of father-son relationships to survival – Henry Wermuth, Elie Wiesel.
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Sonderkommando narratives

- The accounts of *Sonderkommando* survivors are particularly revealing as expressions of male behaviour and choices.
- The *Sonderkommando* (or special detachments) were engaged in the extremely gruesome task of working in the crematoria where the victims' bodies were burned.
- Much discussion on the *Sonderkommando* has been concerned with the moral ambivalence of their positions, as they were living in more privileged circumstances in the camp and had a chance to survive longer, whilst carrying out this unenviable and grisly job for their captors.

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Sonderkommando narratives

- Miklos Nyiszli, Shlomo Venezia and Filip Müller.
 - A number of salient themes emerge from their testimonies, including their experiences upon arrival at Auschwitz; separation from their families; their attitudes to their work; their association with other workers; their relationship to their overseers; and their use of cigarettes and alcohol.
 - These themes suggest important responses and reactions to their circumstances that were male-gendered.
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Conclusion

- A reluctance to treat subjects that were previously considered to be taboo in regard to female behaviour, such as prostitution, indifference or cruelty, that is, modes of being or behaviour that did not fit into broad traditional gendered expectations, has led to the creation of an incomplete picture in much of the historical literature.
- Similarly, a reluctance to consider *Sonderkommando* accounts because they are difficult has left their story under-examined in accounts of the Holocaust.
- Previously unknown and unheard voices - both women's and men's - have begun to find their place in our knowledge and understanding of Holocaust experiences.