

Lessons and Legacies 2020 Conference – Individual Paper Proposal

Submitted by:

Dr. Daina S. Eglitis
Associate Professor of Sociology and International Affairs
George Washington University
Washington, DC
dainas@gwu.edu
+1 301-525-4550

TITLE: “Into the Void: Liberator Violence and Its Victims at the End of World War II”

ABSTRACT (299 words)

In late 1944 and early 1945, men, women, and children held in Nazi concentration camps and on the move in death marches were liberated by Allied forces. Historical narratives of liberation, while not uniform across Allied states, share common themes of triumph and heroism. Indeed, liberation signaled an important moment of transformation, releasing Jews, Soviet prisoners of war, Roma and Sinti, and other survivors from captivity and the threat of annihilation. The celebrated story of liberation is, alas, incomplete: missing from most accounts are the voices of women survivors whose victimization did not end with liberation. This work focuses on the little-examined phenomenon of sexual violence perpetrated by the Soviet army at liberation in the East and the continuing victimization of Jewish girls and women struggling to reach safety, family, and home after their imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps. It examines the phenomenon of sexual violence perpetrated by liberating armies against women survivors as a memory void, defined as *a space in dominant historical narratives that excludes and obscures violence and exploitation perpetrated by those a community wishes to venerate*. This work highlights gendered memory voids and seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive, critical narrative of liberation. This paper addresses the following questions: What do survivor and witness accounts tell us about women’s experiences of sexual violence at liberation? What are dominant themes that emerge from these accounts? What structural and contextual factors influenced the likelihood of violence at liberation? Why have historical accounts of liberation been silent on sexual violence perpetrated against survivors? What does an examination of this phenomenon contribute to Holocaust studies and our understanding of the final stages of World War II? Key sources for this project include survivor testimonies, published and unpublished memoirs, historical accounts of liberation, and theoretical materials on collective memory.

