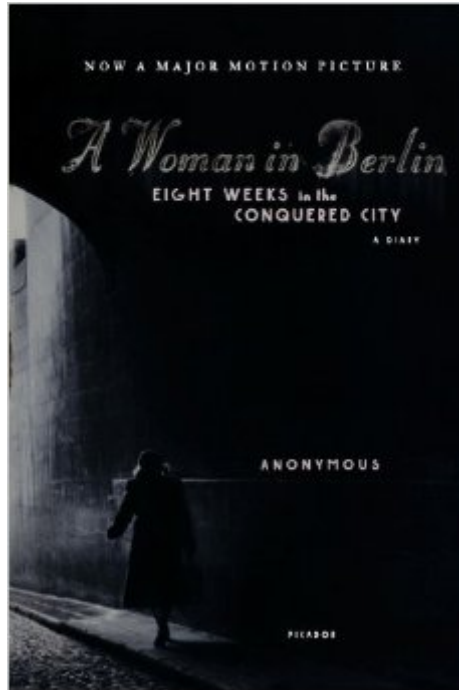


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A Woman In Berlin: Eight Weeks In The Conquered City: A Diary



Synopsis

A New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice For eight weeks in 1945, as Berlin fell to the Russian army, a young woman kept a daily record of life in her apartment building and among its residents. "With bald honesty and brutal lyricism" (Elle), the anonymous author depicts her fellow Berliners in all their humanity, as well as their cravenness, corrupted first by hunger and then by the Russians. "Spare and unpredictable, minutely observed and utterly free of self-pity" (The Plain Dealer, Cleveland), *A Woman in Berlin* tells of the complex relationship between civilians and an occupying army and the shameful indignities to which women in a conquered city are always subject--the mass rape suffered by all, regardless of age or infirmity. *A Woman in Berlin* stands as "one of the essential books for understanding war and life" (A. S. Byatt, author of *Possession*).

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It's unsettling to have to rate this profound diary of a woman's agony. It is what it is, independent by its very existence from any criteria except that which preserves truth. I waited a long time to read this; I was #20 in the library hold list. Meanwhile, before I obtained a copy, I had read the assertion in a letter to the NYTBR questioning the authenticity of the diary. The letter-writer (among others, including a Toronto reviewer) claims the woman was the Berlin journalist Marta Hiller (1911-2001) and how only her death allowed the new translation to be undertaken after an agreement had been made to keep her identity a secret while she was alive. How this would in any way diminish the journal's veracity remained unclear after I had read the letter-writer's argument. I mention these details because, for me, rather than detracting from the power of this diary, they for me confirm that

a real woman lived through these two months and not a frustrated novelist or determined forger. By the way, at one point, she claims she's thirty, when in fact she was thirty-four! Perhaps this all-too-stereotypical "white lie" only confirms its truth! Philip Boehm in his forward verifies that tests have been made that prove that the journal was written at the time. Reading it, while it does bear the well-designed "arc" of a cohesive narrative that begins on Hitler's last birthday and ends as the author meets again her fiance Gerd, I hazard that this only shows that a professional did indeed write the diary and, as is evident from the details that demonstrate her education and observational skills, that she--as the preface explains--polished her initial reactions as she worked on them every day or two and filled her notebook.

The soldiers of the Red army, on their way west in the spring of 1945, behaved like buffoons when they got to Berlin. They careened around on stolen bicycles and crashed into trees. And so the citizens of Berlin--most of them women and children--at first saw them as harmless and comical boys. But once they'd unearthed the stash of liquor Hitler had left behind (hoping it would lead to their drunken defeat by a weakened German army) they turned into rapists. *A Woman in Berlin: Eight Weeks in the Conquered City*, a record of those terrifying encounters, is the diary of a Berlin editor and journalist who never permitted her name to be associated with it during her lifetime. She didn't even hide behind a pseudonym. Her story of the first weeks of the Russian occupation and subsequent rape of 100,000 girls and women in Berlin has never been published under any name other than "Anonymous." Which is this remarkable book's first irony, since anonymous is the last thing she is. "Autonomous" would be a much better name for her, for she is an independent and brave observer, a journalist who literally writes "notes from underground," sparing no one. Not the Russians, not the Germans, not herself. "Anonymous," widely believed to have been the Berlin journalist Marta Hiller, was 34 years old in 1945 and lived to see the dawning of the 21st century (she died at ninety in 2001), and so rather than call her Anonymous, I'll refer to her as MH from now on.

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