

Love between Enemies: Western Prisoners of War and German Women in World War II

By Raffael Scheck. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. ix + 381. Cloth \$39.99. ISBN 978-1108841757.

Sandra Ott

University of Nevada, Reno

Sex and intimacy between “enemies” in wartime Nazi Germany were highly risky pleasures that brought particularly harsh punishments to many ordinary German women who engaged in forbidden liaisons with Western prisoners of war. In this groundbreaking work, Raffael Scheck draws upon an impressive range of German, French, Swiss, Belgian, Austrian, and American archives to tell their stories. The author also links their experiences to the broader context of Nazi notions of racial purity, “the healthy feeling of the *Volk*,” and the Nazi legal system. He estimates that Nazi courts prosecuted fifteen to twenty thousand French, Belgian, and British POWs and roughly the same number of ordinary German women. Scheck provides a rare, comprehensive exploration of these transnational relations through multiple lenses: the spaces in which the POWs and German women worked, flirted, exchanged kisses, and often had sex; the gender dynamics and motives that drove them to initiate, sustain, and sometimes terminate their dangerous liaisons; the circumstances that led to their discovery by guards, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, and to their own betrayals of each other; the legal systems that they faced; their experiences behind bars; and, finally, their post-war attempts to receive indemnification, which were only marginally considered in the courts.

In the first half of the book, Scheck provides many vignettes of forbidden relations. In the seventh chapter, however, he outlines five case studies that give deeper insights into these relationships. As Scheck’s extensive documentation of cases reveals, the punishments for women were very harsh in 1941 but became more lenient in several special courts, possibly owing to Hitler’s “patronizing view of women as passive objects of male desire” (248). By contrast, courts martial punished foreign POWs more harshly from 1941 onward. If such harsh treatment aimed to curb illicit liaisons, the number of cases nevertheless rapidly increased by 1943.

Like French women and German soldiers in occupied France, most Western prisoners of war and German women met through work. French and Belgian POWs who worked on farms were in close, daily contact with German civilians. As I have found in cases of French Basque prisoners of war allocated to German farms, prisoners who worked in agriculture often found themselves integrated into a household as guest members, despite Nazi prohibitions against such familiarity and sociability. Similar social proximity occurred in small businesses, public services, and factories that utilized the labor of prisoners and German women. A lack of supervision and the complicity of guards also afforded ample opportunities for prisoners and women to discover mutual attractions and to act upon them in a field, a barn or a forest, in a factory toilet or a changing room, or in a woman’s apartment. An ability to slip in and out of living spaces fairly freely and complicity notwithstanding, couples took enormous risks. A majority apparently knew that their amorous activities were prohibited. But human desires and wartime circumstances nevertheless led thousands of foreign prisoners and German women to give in to temptation and to face the consequences.

The stories of the accused reveal a wide range of motives for pursuing illicit liaisons: sex and adventure; a mutual longing for comfort and emotional warmth; loneliness and marital unhappiness; and female pity for the plight of a prisoner. A mutual desire for fun and erotic adventure motivated many relationships. Scheck cites one such case in which two German women, both married, initiated sexual relations with four Belgian prisoners in March 1942. Their trysts soon took place in one woman’s apartment. Once discovered in July, the six

culprits were arrested. The “hostess” of their amorous encounters received five years of penal servitude, while her female friend faced three years in a penitentiary. A court martial variously sentenced the men from four and half years to two and a half years in prison. In one spectacular court case in 1943, eleven British POW factory workers and a group of German women, led by a young woman and her housemaid, faced the courts for their nightly parties that involved smoking, drinking, and sexual relations (except in the case of one Jamaican POW whom the other partygoers apparently did not like and who turned them in to the police). The court sentenced the two female ringleaders to more than eight years of penal servitude. Two POWs who had sex with one of the women each faced two and a half years in prison, while the other nine prisoners variously received prison sentences from six to nine months.

Scheck also found many couples that shared a sincere love for each other. Most of them hoped to marry. In one particularly lengthy love relationship, a German farm woman and a Dutch POW established conjugal relations soon after the Wehrmacht drafted her husband in 1941. The husband had been abusive. The POW was likewise in an unhappy marital union. After the husband’s death in 1942 and the transfer of the POW to another community, owing to rumors about the affair, the couple corresponded regularly. The woman bore his child. Various guards, neighbors, and employers all supported the relationship. The dangerous liaison lasted two and a half years. In August 1944, a special court sentenced the woman to two and a half years of penal servitude. The prisoner’s punishment is not known.

While love is a difficult, complex, and highly variable concept across cultures, it seems clear that love had absolutely no part to play in many lust- and perk-driven liaisons. The author cites one such case in which French prisoners and German female farmworkers engaged in sexually charged banter. One German woman urged a prisoner to let his fellow POW know that “he could do *fick, fick* with her if he brought her some chocolate” (103).

In his conclusion, Raffael Scheck asks how these “forbidden relations” should be classified. Were these liaisons private acts driven by self-interest, or acts of resistance? Were the accused victims of Nazi persecution, as some German women argued in their restitution claims? The author concludes that these liaisons affirmed “a common bond of humanity that transcended national and often racial boundaries and undermined the increasingly shrill and depraved hate rhetoric of the Nazi regime.” That common bond, he argues, constituted the “most subversive aspect of their forbidden relationships” (360).

Love Between Enemies is a remarkable book.

doi:10.1017/S0008938921001606

Der Deutsche Kanal. Eine Mythologie der alten Bundesrepublik

**By Frank Uekötter. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2020.
Pp. 330. Cloth €29.00. ISBN 978-3515126038.**

Charles Closmann

University of North Florida

In the last decade, scholarly perspectives on the Bundesrepublik Deutschland (BRD) have evolved. Whereas an earlier generation of historians—writing in the 1980s and 1990s—emphasized what they considered to be the success of the BRD from 1949 to 1989, a more recent generation has complicated this narrative and challenged whether the BRD was