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Written by Maureen Younger

VOICES

Rubble Rousers

In the aftermath of World War II, the Trümmerfrauen (rubble women) took on the painstaking labour involved in rebuilding Germany. *Maureen Younger* tells their story.

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During the Second World War the necessities of conflict meant that, for the first time ever, women in Britain were conscripted for war work: from working on the land to flying spitfires to air bases around the UK. In Nazi Germany, however, women were left in no doubt that their role in life was to be that of a wife and mother – preferably to as many children as possible. By 1945 all this was to change; German women soon discovered that they were to be the cornerstone in helping to rebuild Germany's countless war-torn cities and towns.

The Trümmerfrauen – rubble women – helped rebuild Germany brick by brick. They had a momentous task ahead of them. By the end of the war 8million German homes had either been destroyed or damaged; whole city centres from Hamburg to Dresden to Nuremburg and Berlin lay in ruins; almost half of German infrastructure – gas and electricity supplies, roads and railways – had been destroyed. Not surprisingly the economy was in collapse.



As well as the numerous Germans who had been made homeless due to bombing, ground fighting and fire storms, there were 12million refugees from the East who had fled their homes before the advancing Soviet army in the largest exodus of civilians the world has ever seen. It was clear that, first and foremost, the mountains of rubble had to be cleared and, if possible, houses made habitable again, while tottering buildings needed to be dismantled so new ones could be put up in their place.

However, by the end of the war Germany was suffering from a severe shortage of men. Millions of German men were either dead, had been taken as prisoners-of-war, severely wounded or were emotionally broken, and so it was left to German women to pick up the pieces. Literally.

photograph by Janczikowsky



Consequently, after years of being told that the German woman's place was resolutely in the home and heaven forefend she should even think of putting on a pair of trousers, women were organised in work columns and worked all day on what must have been the biggest building sites in history, removing rubble, often without the luxury of heavy machinery. If they were lucky they might have a pair of gloves, a pick and a hand-winch.

And whereas survivors of the Blitz in Great Britain could bemoan their woes as the victims of the German aggressor, this clearly was not possible for the Trümmerfrauen. The world was just learning about the extent of the horrors that had been perpetrated in Germany's name, so not surprisingly there was very little sympathy for the trials and tribulations of German

civilians. As a result these women just got on with the job at hand, and in the process were instrumental in helping Germany to rise from the ashes and rubble which, by 1945, many German cities had become.

The rubble women worked hard and fast: whereas bomb sites could still be seen in Britain decades later, the bomb sites in Germany had been cleared by the late 1950s. The work of these Trümmerfrauen helped make a path for both East and West Germany to start to gain headway as bona fide nations. In the case of West Germany it also helped lay the groundwork for the economic miracle under Chancellor Adenauer, which saw Germany become an economic powerhouse and the fourth largest economy in the world.

History shows us that it is often HIS-story, and the work of the Trümmerfrauen is little known outside Germany. Likewise, it was only doing research for this article, for example, that despite being a Londoner born and bred, I first learnt that many of the builders of the current Waterloo Bridge in London were also women.

Throughout history society has often told women what they can and can't do. At various times we've been told we couldn't possibly go to university, work as a doctor, or god forbid be a standup comic (we're still occasionally being told that one). But as the case of the Trümmerfrauen so deftly shows, now and then it becomes expedient for the decision to be made that women are actually capable of doing something which years, months, or even weeks previously would have apparently signalled the death knell for society as we know it. (Equal pay anyone?)

As is sadly also often the case, as soon as the Trümmerfrauen were no longer needed, German women were soon exhorted to adopt more traditional roles. However, if the Trümmerfrauen show us anything, it's that women are capable of doing anything they put their minds to – even if this means removing millions of cubic metres of rubble, brick by painstaking brick.

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WRITTEN BY MAUREEN YOUNGER

A London-Scottish, multi-lingual, much-travelled stand up comic working on the mainstream, urban and gay comedy circuits, actor and writer. www.maureenyounger.com @MaureenYounger

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